

Iori Miyazawa



OTHERSIDE PICNIC

2

Resort Night at the Beach of the End

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File 5: The Operation to Rescue the U.S. Forces at Kisaragi Station

1

The smell of burning meat hung in a dark room.

Each time the red tongues of flame licked at the fat, the fire grew in intensity. The rising smoke stimulated the nose. This smell would adhere to clothing and hair alike, and it wouldn't go away for some time...

July. With the rainy season over, Tokyo marched onward into summer.

New heat records were being set by the day, and I was pale with worry about the approaching final exam season. In a surprise twist, regardless of what I might be getting up to in my abnormal life exploring the other world, my university courses and papers continued to exist.

There was a time when I'd had my doubts. In true ghost stories, there were plenty of narrators who had these unbelievably bizarre experiences, yet they forgot them for a long time and went back to their daily lives as though nothing had happened. I'd always wondered if that was really possible, but now that I found myself in the same position, I understood.

No matter how bizarre the experience, it was possible to return to your regular life. If you didn't think about it, it was fine—your body would move on its own.

That was how great the power of daily routine was. It was a sort of homeostasis, the same as the way the human body maintained a stable internal temperature. One mildly mysterious experience couldn't break down that routine.

On the other hand, there were those who could never return to normal.

Those whose bodies were broken. Those who'd lost their minds. Those whose relationships with friends and family were messed up by the inability to make anyone believe in their experience.

Even if they didn't do enough damage to utterly destroy a person's life, there were times when encounters with the bizarre could penetrate the armor of homeostasis and leave scars. Someone might be left unable to sleep without the lights on, become afraid of the sea, or have memories from a certain stretch of time become vague.

In some, their fear might get reversed, turning into angry outbursts.

...Like with Kozakura, who was in front of Toriko and me right now.

We were seated at a table at a yakiniku restaurant, an oppressive silence hanging between us. Even with salted beef tongue sizzling away on the metal net in front of her, Kozakura's expression remained harsh.

"Um, Kozakura-san. I think it's fine now..." I hesitantly said, causing Kozakura to glare at me through the smoke.

"You think this is fine? Don't expect me to forgive you so easily."

"Uh, no, I meant the meat. I was thinking it looks like it's ready to eat."

Kozakura furrowed her brow, snorting indignantly, then slowly picked up her chopsticks and took some beef tongue from the net. Three whole pieces.

"Ohh, it smells good! Let's hurry up and dig in, too, Sorawo!" Toriko said in an excited voice, letting her chopsticks hover over the edge of the net without permission.

"...Do you even understand what today is about?" Kozakura took a shot at her before I could. "This is a meeting for review and reflection. One where you two reflect on what you did, and apologize to me."

"Okay. Sorry. You're right—it is." As she gave that meek response, Toriko grabbed a piece of beef tongue and stuck it in her mouth with a thoughtful look on her face.

"Mmm! That's good!"

She's not reflecting on anything, I thought as I reached out with my

chopsticks.

...Ohh. This really is amazing. It tastes so good, even with just lemon and salt.

“What do you want to cook next? Any preferences on order?”

“Anything works, just cook whatever,” Kozakura said, not seeming to care, and took a sip of her beer. The medium-size mug she was using looked awfully big for her little body. It made me feel like I was giving alcohol to a minor. It seemed like she was aware of how it looked, and when we ordered, she produced her driver’s license before the staff said anything.

Toriko laid out some chuck on the net; she was probably better at doing this than I was. This was the first time in my life I’d ever come to a yakiniku place, so I decided to leave it to her.

The reason we were having our after-party at a yakiniku place was the result of a strong insistence by Kozakura. To be more precise, it was because, as Kozakura had said, this was a review and reflection party.

In our last expedition to the other world, I abandoned Kozakura alone in the dangerous night there to search for Toriko.

Inside a massive glitch that took the form of a town, I used the power of my right eye to turn Kozakura into a plant. With night having fallen, I thought she would be safest like that. Inside that glitch, my perception defined the environment around me. I made my decision based on the belief that, if I perceived Kozakura as a plant, she could escape from the gaze of the other world’s monsters.

Kozakura had told me herself that she was scared to death of the other world, so I thought being left alone would frighten her even more, and she’d get mad at Toriko and me for having dragged her into this. However, when I found Toriko, brought her back, and the three of us were together again, Kozakura was acting weird. She seemed dazed, and only gave non-responses to anything we said to her. Even after we returned to the surface world, she was still not talking much. When we escorted her home, she shut herself inside and locked the door without so much as a good-bye.

I was wondering, *Is she okay?* Then, before I knew it, a week had passed. I got

a sudden call from Kozakura, and when I answered the phone, she told me this with a voice full of rage:

“Screw you! I’ve had enough of this bullshit from both of you!!”

It seemed that, after she’d been through such a frightening experience, her mind had wandered off somewhere else for a while.

“Meat...” Kozakura said as I was apologizing profusely over the phone.

“Feed me meat. My anger won’t subside until I’ve had yakiniku.”

“Erm...”

“Good meat. I want quality. If you take me to some cheap all-you-can-eat place, I’ll press your hands against the burning-hot net until it leaves a stylish checkered pattern.”

“Um, is this supposed to be my treat? I don’t have much money... Toriko’s the rich one...”

I got that far before I was cut off by a torrent of verbal abuse from Kozakura.

This was an adult who lived in a high-class residential area in Shakujii-kouen, and she was making an impoverished university student pay for her. That’s pretty awful.

The situation being what it was, I talked to Toriko, and we agreed we would have an after-party, or rather a review and reflection party, with the three of us together. Toriko chose the place, a short walk from the west exit of Ikebukuro Station, in an area where public order seemed a little dodgy. The cost hurt, but it certainly was tasty... I never knew there were so many kinds of meat. I was smiling despite myself.

“Sorawo-chan, what are you grinning for?”

I realized Kozakura was looking at me like I was weird, so I covered my mouth. “Sorry. The chuck was just so delicious.”

“Well, it’s fine. You’re the ones paying, after all,” she said in an exasperated tone. I snapped back to my senses. That was right! Toriko and I were footing the bill.

“Toriko! Don’t over-order like you always do.”

“Whaa, we’ll eat it all. It’ll be fine.”

“This isn’t about the amount of food! And hold on, I’m the one who always ends up having to finish it, right? Toriko, you always order everything you can, and then slow down towards the end.”

“I love watching you struggle to eat it all.”

What was that?

While I was still speechless at her unexpected response, the special kalbi spare ribs she had ordered at some point arrived, and I had to move on.

The three of us raced to snatch the meat cooking on the net. Then, as I was savoring the melt-in-your-mouth goodness of the soft fat, Toriko started speaking in an apologetic tone.

“Umm, so, about what happened this time... I think I was in the wrong. I didn’t think Sorawo would be coming with me anymore, and I’d never have expected Kozakura would come searching for me, too. I didn’t mean to get you involved. Sorry.”

Kozakura and I kept chewing, listening to Toriko in silence.

Kozakura swallowed, and then, sounding unamused, she said, “You say that like it was our fault for chasing after you, you know?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Couldn’t you put a little more faith in me?” I said, expressing my dissatisfaction.

“I did have faith in you! It’s just... I’d have felt bad making you go along with any more of my selfishness.”

It sounded like Toriko was making excuses. *What’s this? She’s more vulnerable than usual.*

I felt like being a bit of a bully, so my tone of voice went cold. “You went there alone because you didn’t think you could rely on me, right? You never even thought I might come save you, did you? This, after all we’ve been through

together. Isn't that a little harsh?"

"I'm telling you, I'm sorry..."

I'd made a point of not looking at her when I spoke, but it was still readily apparent how troubled she was.

What do I do now?

This is kind of fun.

"Sorawo-chan."

"Yes?"

"I'll have you know, you're even worse."

I was about to get carried away, but then Kozakura spoke up in a barbed tone.

"I trusted you, Sorawo-chan. I mean, you were saying you'd leave me 'in a safe state.'"

"Y-Yes?"

"What was that place...? You abandoned me in some kind of field of flowers."

"Field of flowers?"

"The next thing I knew, you were gone. There was the sound of flowing water, and I heard people talking all around me, but no one was there. I knew I didn't belong there, but I couldn't convince myself to go anywhere else."

Kozakura spoke in a dazed tone. Her eyes stared off into the distance, and even with the bright red charcoal fire of the grill in front of her, I could see goosebumps all over her arms.

"I was immobilized, like my feet had grown roots, and I was just standing there staring off into space. The voices around me got so noisy that I plugged my ears, but then the alignment of stars in the night sky gradually started to look like it had some meaning, and that scared me silly. The voices were getting angry, too. It was maddening, but I thought that, probably, I was a goner if I blacked out. So I crouched down, staring at the ground and saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' to someone standing near me... and the next thing I knew, you two were there."

Kozakura shut her eyes tight, then let out a sigh.

“It turned out all right since you were able to come back, but I was in serious danger there, wasn’t I...? What were you going to do if I went insane, or died, Sorawo-chan?”

“At the time... I thought you’d be okay...”

“Oh, yeah?”

“But you... weren’t, huh? Haha... ha.”

Kozakura’s glare pierced right through me, and my awkward laughter trailed off.

“Kozakura, Sorawo did it to search for me. She had no—”

When Toriko tried to intercede, Kozakura’s eyes widened in anger. “Shut up! If you defend Sorawo-chan now, it makes me look like the bad guy for picking on her! I’m the victim! You were both in the wrong! Don’t make excuses!”

“I-I’m sorry.”

When I apologized and bowed my head, Kozakura got this unpleasantly smug look on her face. “Sorawo-chan, you know, I’ll bet you didn’t give one thought to what would happen to me.”

“N-No, that’s taking it a bit too far.”

“It’s not just me, it’s Satsuki, too. I heard from Toriko. You didn’t hesitate to shoot the thing with Satsuki’s face.”

“That one wasn’t even human...”

“We barely know anything about what kind of effects the other world has on people. Did that not occur to you in the slightest? You must have thought it could at least be related to the real Satsuki, right? You thought that, and then deliberately ignored it. Do you just not give a damn about other people? You don’t care about anyone but yourself, am I right?”

“Kozakura...”

“You shut up, Toriko.”

Toriko arched her eyebrows, immediately cut off. I felt bad about what

happened, but this one-sided verbal beatdown was starting to piss me off. I didn't like that Toriko and Kozakura were talking about Satsuki without me around, either.

I knocked back my beer for courage, then slammed the empty mug down on the table and leaned in hard.

"If you're going to go that far, I have some questions of my own!"

"Oh? What, you think you have the right to be mad at me now?"

"I've wondered all this time, but what the hell are you, Kozakura? A cognitive scientist, was it? Really? What kind of work do you do, shut up inside your house all the time? You're not old enough to be a professor, that's for sure. Even I know that researcher positions don't pay much. How do you put food on the table? Where did that million come from?"

"...The money I gave you, you mean?"

"That's right! What, was it yakuza money? Is that why you have such easy access to guns?!"

When I turned a suspicious gaze on Kozakura, she gestured for Toriko to lean in a little closer, then asked her, "Toriko, is Sorawo-chan a bad drinker?"

"I don't think she has a low tolerance. I think it's that she gets worked up when she's angry."

"What're you two whispering about?!"

"This? It's called a stage whisper," Kozakura said, sounding irritated, then grabbed a king oyster mushroom from the corner of the net and popped it in her mouth. "And when it comes to your prying questions, it's none of your business... is what I'd like to say, but, well, I can understand your concern. No, it's not yakuza money, so relax."

"Well, what is it, then?"

Kozakura's eyes wandered as if she were thinking. "There's a private organization that trades in information on the other world. I'm a member, and they provide me with some amount of funding," she said in a careful tone.

"Huh?! This is the first I've heard of it!" Toriko's eyes went wide. So did mine.

“What’s with that? Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Did I need to? I’m simply engaged in specialist discourse with other researchers. Toriko is just searching for Satsuki, and you’re in it for the money, right?”

“Could you not say it in a way that makes me sound bad?”

“I think you should worry about more than just sounding bad.”

Like what? I thought, but then Toriko leaned over the table.

“Was Satsuki a member, too, maybe?”

“It was Satsuki who dragged me in. Frankly, I’m just filling in for her now that she up and vanished,” Kozakura said angrily, snatching a blackened sliver of kalbi from on top of the net. It looked like Toriko wanted to say something, but she gave up, casting her eyes down sullenly.

There was a bit of a downer mood going on here. Feeling less than satisfied with how that had gone, I sighed. “...Do you want more meat?” I asked Kozakura.

“I do.”

“I do.”

The two of them answered in unison.

I wasn’t asking you, Toriko.

Though I had been prepared for it, the bill came to a substantial sum, which sobered me up real fast. We split the bill, but Toriko was still happily swaying left and right as she walked. Oh, how I hated her.

I was taking the Saikyo Line home, Toriko was taking the Yamanote Line, and Kozakura was on the Seibu Ikebukuro Line. Toriko said she’d walk Kozakura to the ticket gate, and I just sort of ended up tagging along.

When we had passed through the hustle and bustle of Ikebukuro Station and reached the ground-level ticket gate of the Seibu Line, Kozakura suddenly spoke up. “Sorawo-chan, why don’t you come to my place tonight?”

“Huh? I’m not going to, but why?”

“I don’t want to go home alone.”

When she said that sullenly, looking at me with upturned eyes, I was bewildered.

“Can’t you stay the night in a manga cafe or something?”

“No, I’m saying I don’t want to be alone.”

“...?”

I tilted my head to the side questioningly, which made Kozakura get impatient. She raised her voice. “I’m scared! Of being alone!”

“Why are you getting mad?”

“I’m not mad! Take a hint! What am I supposed to do if those three middle-aged ladies come back?”

“Shoot them with a shotgun?”

“You are so heartless!” Kozakura thrust a finger at me in indignation.

I was getting a bit offended, but Toriko leaned in, looking concerned. “Want me to come with you?”

Even though Toriko was being quite nice, Kozakura shook her head. “You, I don’t need.”

“Why not?!”

I tried to mollify Kozakura, and spoke in the gentlest tone I could manage. “We just made plans, didn’t we? Toriko and I will be coming over tomorrow to discuss our next expedition. Please don’t shoot us by accident, okay?”

“If you get scared, you can call any time!”

“Sigh... There you go, treating me like a child,” Kozakura spat distastefully, and turned away. As she headed for the ticket gate, Toriko called after her.

“That meat sure was tasty, huh!”

“...Thanks.”

Kozakura gave us an exhausted wave, and then in no time, she was swallowed

into the crowd.

I gave a sidelong glance at Toriko, who watched her go with concern. “Toriko, you’re such a good person, you know that?”

“Really? Gosh, you’re embarrassing me.” Toriko puffed up her chest with pride, but then, reconsidering, she added, “But I think Kozakura is the kindest.”

2

The next day, at 11:00 a.m. on a Saturday, I visited Kozakura’s house in Shakujii-kouen, as promised. I rang the doorbell and waited for a response.

This door had been assaulted by three massive middle-aged women, but it was intact, and the doorknob didn’t even rattle. Instead, the wooden surfaces, and even the hard metal parts, had thin scratches all over them, like they had been clawed at by something. *Was it a human hand, or an animal one?* As I pondered the incongruity between the phenomenon we had experienced and the traces it had left, I heard footsteps approaching from inside the house.

When the door opened and a head poked out, it was Toriko. Like me, she had also come here in light clothing meant for going on an expedition. Camo pants, and a thin, black, long-sleeved shirt. The golden hair flowing over her shoulders looked great on black.

“I thought the three middle-aged women I’ve heard so much about had come.”

“Wait enough years, and there’ll be one middle-aged woman here.”

“Ahaha. Make that two, if you include me.”

I took off my shoes and went inside Kozakura’s house. The hallway, which was always dark before, was lit up for a change. It made the dust in the corners stand out.

“She says she’s afraid of the dark now,” Toriko said before I could ask. “Has to take sleeping meds to get to sleep at night, too. I’m worried.”

“Oh, yeah?”

As the one who dragged her into things, I felt some degree of guilt. I wouldn't have cared much if she was just scared, but if there were actual ramifications to it, then that was a problem, yeah.

The door on the left at the end of the hall led to Kozakura's room. There was light through the door on the right, too, and I could see a combination dining room/kitchen in there. There was a simple, thick birchwood table, and four chairs. Next to a fridge that was awfully large for a woman who lived alone was a pile of garbage bags stuffed full of plastic cola bottles.

Kozakura's room was not much different from the last time I'd come. If there was one thing that had changed, it was that the shotgun was left out in the open, next to her desk. Surprisingly, the lights were off in this room, and the only illumination came from the multi-monitor display.

When I saw Kozakura perched on her chair, surrounded by towers of piled up books, I had a feeling I understood why this was the only room not lit up. This was her comfortable nest. Her cramped, dark secret base, where she could feel at ease.

"Kozakura-san, the front door's—"

"I know. I already ordered a replacement."

The way she glared at me said *Not another word about it*, but I pretended not to notice and continued on.

"So, do you think that was the work of a tanuki, after all?"

Kozakura blinked, as if I'd caught her by surprise.

"...Huh?"

"The pieces would all fit that way, wouldn't they?"

"Pfft!" Kozakura burst out laughing and shook her head. "What are you talking about, you dummy...? Enough about this. Let's get right to the point."

When she said that and turned to face me again, I couldn't help but feel her gaze had softened a little from before.

"You people can go the other world if you want, but I'm never going with you again, got it?"

“Yeah, I figured. Got it.”

I looked at Toriko, and we both nodded.

“We’ve come here today to consult with you about our next expedition—the Operation to Rescue the U.S. forces at Kisaragi Station.” I moved everything off of the low table in front of the sofa, and spread out the paper I had brought with me. “I’ve been thinking it’s about time we had a map.”

Those words, meant for the two who were watching me, may have sounded a little like an excuse.

On the paper was my hand-drawn map of the other world. It was done on A3 paper that I had helped myself to at the university and drawn with a thin felt-tip pen. But despite that, when looked at under the soft light of a bedside reading lamp, it felt like the map of the sort of magical kingdom that would appear in stories. I was a bit embarrassed to make that association.

And yet, what was mapped here was nothing cute. There was the glitch-filled grasslands that Hakushaku-sama stalked, the marsh where the Kunekunes appeared, the ghost town with the Time-space Man and the strange human-sized plants... Even with just the places we already knew, it was already plenty dangerous.

Toriko looked up, brushing her hair back behind her ear, and when our eyes met she grinned at me.

“It’s like a treasure map!”

“...You think so, too?” I said, and Toriko nodded with her eyes sparkling.

“What is wrong with you two?”

Kozakura leaned away, as if repulsed, but I leaned in and pointed a finger right at the center of the map. “This is the skeletal building that’s connected to Jinbouchou. It’s what the U.S. forces would call our entry point. That’s a bit long, so let’s call it a gate. The X out in the east is the gate in Oomiya I was originally using. The geography of the other world is nothing like this side’s, but I felt like there were a reasonable number of solid landmarks. The gates, in particular, look to be stable. Even after I stopped being able to use the gate in Oomiya, there were still traces of it in the other world.”

“The one in Oomiya is no longer functional, right?” Toriko asked.

“Yep, hence the X. You two have been to the other world more than I have, and I think you know more than I do, so if you can add any information you have, I was thinking that’d be good. How about it?”

There was no response, so I looked up. They were both staring down at the map, their faces full of emotion for some reason.

“Toriko?”

“Oh, uh, sorry. I was just thinking... Satsuki made a map like this, too.”

“Always drawing in her notebook, yeah... Even though I told her she should draw it on larger sheets of paper.”

“That’s enough reminiscing.” I cut them right off. “Hold on, Toriko. If we have a map, why couldn’t you bring it out sooner?”

“We don’t anymore. Satsuki took it.”

“Where to...? Ohh, you mean it’s gone like her. Okay.”

When I summed things up crudely like that, they both gave me unhappy looks. *Not my problem. I think I’ll just ignore it any time they get sentimental about Satsuki from now on.*

When I handed over the felt-tip pen, Toriko and Kozakura reached out to the map, sighing, and took turns filling in details. There were marks indicating a number of buildings west of the skeletal building, and a path leading into the mountains on the north side, past the ghost town. There was something like an aqueduct south of the marsh to the west. Still, as much as I had gotten my hopes up, there was no dramatically new information.

“That’s all? Even if we ignore Kozakura-san for the moment, you’ve been there about ten times, haven’t you, Toriko?”

Toriko shrugged. “When I first started, it was Satsuki taking me there, and we slowly expanded our area of operations as we confirmed things were safe. Once Satsuki vanished, I tried stretching my legs a bit further, but I met you soon after that, and you know the rest.”

“Well, darn. You’re not much different from me, then.”

“If anything, you’re bolder, Sorawo. When I first met you, you were suddenly dying.”

“I don’t know if I’d call that being bold...”

“Sorawo-chan, would you say this is where Kisaragi Station is?”

Kozakura pointed to a rectangle drawn in the southwest of the map.

“I don’t know the precise location, but I just sort of drew it in the corner there.”

“It’s been half a month since then. The Marines have got to be close to their limits by now,” Toriko said, sounding concerned. I nodded and continued.

“That’s why... if we’re going to save them, I think this is our last chance.”

The survivors of the U.S. Marines Palehorse Battalion, which had wandered into the other world during a training exercise in Okinawa, were already pretty exhausted by the time they ran into us. It was probably only a matter of time before they were wiped out.

Kozakura raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“What brought this on? I’m sorry to say it, Sorawo-chan, but I can’t see you being the type who would put yourself at risk to go help a group of strangers.”

“I’m the one who said we should go save them,” Toriko raised her hand and said.

“I mean, obviously, I don’t wholly trust them, either. But I don’t think we can just leave them isolated in a place like that,” she said, her voice filled with passion.

“I see... If you have Sorawo-chan’s eye, you figure you can lead them past the glitches, and to the gate you came in through, huh?”

“That’s right. If we can get that far, we should also be able to use Toriko’s hand to return to the surface world, too.”

“Fair enough, it may be possible. But these people you’re dealing with are the military, and a foreign military at that. If we’re to trust the words of this Lieutenant Drake you met, they’re a secret unit that doesn’t exist in public

records. Even if we could safely send them back to Okinawa, there's a high likelihood it would get us into trouble."

"So you're saying we should leave them to die?"

"You always were like that, weren't you?" Kozakura muttered with no expression on her face, then looked at me.

"And you're awfully willing to tag along, too, Sorawo-chan..."

"If I'm being honest, I have another goal here, too."

"What?"

"It's guns. I want new guns."

"...Why?"

"Taking on monsters with nothing but a Makarov, as you might expect, has been making me feel a little uneasy lately. The rifle and shotgun felt powerful when I tried using them, so I want the U.S. forces to give us guns and ammo."

Kozakura glared at Toriko. "Did you put her up to this, too?"

"Nope. I've already got an AK."

"Oh, Kozakura-san, do you happen to have any other guns you keep hidden?"

"Uh, no."

"You, Toriko?"

"When I went to the other world with Satsuki, we would hide the guns we found over there... I'm not confident I could lead you back to those same spots, though."

"Welp, I guess that means I'll need to get them from the U.S. forces after all, then."

Kozakura looked at me with an inscrutable expression, then seemed to say that she'd given up. "...I'll pray you don't get shot to death."

"I'll be with her, so it'll be fine." Toriko probably had no real basis to say that, but it was still reassuring.

"But how do you intend to get there to begin with? You haven't found a gate

leading to Kisaragi Station, right?”

It was a reasonable issue to bring up, but I had an idea about that.

3

It was a Saturday in Shinjuku, and two women who looked like they were dressed to go participate in some survival games, along with a woman who looked like a middle-school-aged shut-in, were walking along with the crowd. Objectively, that’s how we must have looked. Even as we entered a tavern at lunchtime and were seated, the look of dissatisfaction on Kozakura’s face didn’t fade.

“I’d never have thought I’d come all the way to Shinjuku just to eat lunch,” she said.

“Hey, where’s the harm, once in a while? What’ll you have?” Toriko asked.

“Mackerel simmered in miso.”

“I’ll have the ginger pork set. And you, Sorawo?”

“Huh? Uh, the karaage chicken, I guess?” I answered, still lost in thought as I looked around the tavern. The place was open for lunch, and filled almost to capacity. It felt a lot different from how it did at night, but there was no mistaking that this was the same place we had come to before.

The tavern where Toriko and I were having an after-party that day, when we unwittingly stepped into the night of the other world. Nothing looked out of the ordinary right now. No barking from the kitchen, and the busy staff were speaking and acting like sane, ordinary people.

“You really plan to do this? Here?” Kozakura asked dubiously.

“We’ll do it. I don’t want to go when it’s night again, so if we’re going to test this out, it has to be at lunchtime.”

I removed a Ziploc bag containing a woman’s wide-brimmed hat from my backpack. It was the foreign object Hasshaku-sama left behind. It was my hypothesis that this was the cause of our accidental entry into the other world the time we went to Kisaragi Station. We had come here today to replicate the

conditions, and deliberately enter the other world.

“Hey, Sorawo, if we’re going to recreate the same conditions, shouldn’t I be the one to do it?”

“No, I’ll do it this time. If it doesn’t work, then I’ll ask you to,” I responded, staring at the Ziploc bag. It looked like a folded hat. Nothing out of the ordinary about it, but on close inspection, it really did have a silver halo of light around it.

The truth is, there’s a reason I said I would be the one to do it. Kozakura had checked it with a Geiger counter, and done a chemical analysis of the sample of fibers taken from it and turned up nothing unusual, but I still couldn’t be certain there were no ill effects on the wearer. Toriko had used it once, then I would use it once, and I wanted that to be the end of us using it.

“Kozakura-san. If we’re able to go to the other world again like this, could we get you to buy the hat off us?”

“Even if you can go, you can’t say with absolute certainty it was the hat. The issue could be with the entrance, or with this tavern itself.”

“If that were true, wouldn’t all the customers disappear?”

“Or perhaps you yourselves are the cause. Maybe once you’ve been to the other world once, it forms a habit.”

That point of hers hit a soft spot. *Has going to the other world several times changed us in a way that makes it easier for us to be drawn towards it?* It wasn’t the first or even the second time that thought had crossed my mind. Like, the time I encountered the Time-space Guy? That was clearly a case of contact coming from the other side.

“Well, if that’s true, you’re not in that different a situation from us, huh?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“So, first, I’ll ask you to leave the tavern. Then Toriko and I will use the hat before leaving. If that leaves you in the surface world, while we go to the other world by ourselves, I think it’s highly probable that the hat is responsible.”

Kozakura’s eyes went wide. “*That’s* why you brought me along? To use as

your guinea pig—”

“N-No! I mean, you were the one who said you’d come, weren’t you?”

Yes, for all her belly-aching, Kozakura had still gone to all the trouble of following us to Shinjuku. I wish she’d stop making me sound worse than I was.

Kozakura scowled unhappily. “Well, fine. If you can go to the other world, then come back, I’ll buy it off you.”

I nodded in relief. My livelihood was on the line here, after all.

The first to finish eating was Kozakura. She left her pickled vegetables untouched, so I helped myself to them, and as I was doing so she pushed her chair away and stood up.

“Well, I’ll be going on ahead.”

“Sure, see you later. Sorawo, you want my pickled veggies, too?” Toriko asked.

“Give ‘em here.”

“You like pickles that much?”

“I just hate to see them left behind,” I replied to Kozakura.

“Sorawo, you sure do a good job cleaning your plate,” Toriko said with a grin. Was this something I could take as a genuine compliment?

“I’m going to drop by the Yodobashi on my way back, so if using the hat doesn’t work out, get in contact.”

Kozakura left a 1,000 yen bill on the table, then left the tavern by herself.

“You think that means she wants us all to head back together?” Toriko cocked her head to the side. That thought hadn’t occurred to me, so I was perplexed.

“She’s too scared to go home alone? I’d understand if it were at night, but it’s still broad daylight out there.”

“Either she’s scared, or she feels uneasy when she isn’t with someone.”

Was that it? Even with the terrible attitude she had towards others...?

“Well, how about we get going, too, then? Toriko, you good to go?”

“I’m good.”

I opened the Ziploc bag, pulled out the folded hat, carefully unfolded it, then placed it on my head.

As I did, Toriko took a picture of me.

“...What’re you doing?”

“It’s a novel look for you.”

“Does it suit me?”

“Erm...” Toriko hesitated to answer, so I took the hint and took off the hat.

“You know what? Forget it. Don’t say anything.”

“Ah! No, that’s not it, it actually does suit you. Yeah...”

As she groaned, struggling to say something, I took a peek at Toriko’s smartphone screen.

In a way, the hat did look good on me.

The combination of a large, white, wide-brimmed hat, which might have suited a well-off girl visiting a summer resort on a windy plateau, with my clothes—a long-sleeved khaki shirt with a black undershirt—left an impression similar to that of a mother out weeding the fields.

“Yeah, I think it’s cute in its own way. You don’t look entirely unlike a guide at a safari park.”

“I told you not to say anything.”

I’m never putting it on again. Having pledged that in my heart, I violently folded up the hat and returned it to the Ziploc bag.

“You’re putting it away already?”

“You didn’t wear it for very long back then, either. Let’s get out of here before this place gets all messed up.”

“Oh! Yeah, let’s.”

If we were really going to recreate the circumstances from last time, maybe we should have waited until things got messed up. But I just couldn’t convince

myself to. If we waited indoors, where there was nowhere to run as the people around us started to go crazy, it was going to drive me nuts.

I rose from my seat, shouldering my heavy bag, and walked over to the register to settle the bill. When we left, I didn't feel anything especially abnormal.

The streets outside were the same as ever, too. In my experience, when we transitioned into the other world, the first sign of it that manifested was a weirding of language. I listened to the conversations of people passing by, of touts calling customers in for lunch time, and I paid close attention to the text on signs as we started on our leisurely walk back to the station.

"Toriko, how long would you say the gap between you putting the hat on, and us noticing something was wrong was last time?"

"I put it on right after we got to the tavern, right? We were drinking for maybe three hours or so."

"If that was a factor, it's going to be a pain. Having to walk back and forth through these crowded streets for three whole hours is a bit much..."

It was the middle of summer, and we were lugging around our equipment for the expedition, which made it even worse.

"...It's not changing, huh," Toriko said quietly.

"Yeah..." I said, lowering my eyes to the asphalt and staring at the feet of people who passed by, my confidence gradually waning. "Maybe it didn't work this time. Sorry."

"No... Looks like that might not be it."

Suddenly, there was a tenseness in Toriko's voice.

When I looked up, at some point, everyone around us had vanished.

"Huh?"

I was baffled when I spotted a group of iron bars growing out of the pavement at random. They were all about 50 centimeters long. The rusted and bent rebar had strings of all colors hanging from it, and they swayed in a breeze that came from somewhere. Until just now, I had been perceiving these things as human

legs.

The street had changed, too. The glass doors of the shops facing onto the street had curtains in faded colors or red and white curtains covering them, and out-of-tune music could be heard playing from inside. There were growling voices keeping in time with the melody, as if they were singing karaoke, then when it ended there was a monotonous clapping of hands.

“Sorawo, look. The signs.”

The sign for what had been a hamburger joint on the corner was now indecipherable. It was the linguistic obstruction phenomenon. I thought it looked awfully dark on the other side of the glass door, but the entire building had turned into a water tank. The entire floor was covered with crustaceans, like prawn the size of a person’s arm, and I could see their antennae perked up and writhing about.

We turned to look at one another in unison. In a small voice, Toriko asked me, “Is this... the other world?”

“It’s probably something else. This is an interstitial space, I’d guess.”

“Like the place you were talking about, the man’s world?”

“...I’m regretting that name.”

We walked through the changed streets. We had moved into the other world while trying to reach the station that time, so we headed the same direction again.

“Toriko, did you notice the moment it changed?”

“Nuh-uh. I mean, that strange costumed character was muttering to themselves, and they were kinda filthy and smelled bad. I didn’t like it, so my attention was focused on them. When we got further away and I looked in front of me again, everything had already changed.”

“There was a costumed character?”

“There was. I’ve never seen one that weird. It looked like it’d been drowned in a swamp.”

I may have been looking down at the ground, but you’d think I’d have still

noticed if someone went by in a costume like that. Still, there was no way to check now.

“Unlike going through the elevator or a door, this method takes some time... This interstitial space is unpleasant, so I’d like to get through it quickly.”

“Hmm, but when we use the elevator in Jinbouchou, we see floors that shouldn’t exist, right? Wouldn’t you say that’s the same?”

“Oh! That’s right!”

When I remembered the first time Toriko took me for a ride on that elevator, it made sense to me. That dark floor may have been part of the interstitial space.

“Though there may be a difference in how long it takes, the fact of the matter may be that we always pass through this space. You’re smart, Toriko.”

“Really? You’re embarrassing me.” Toriko smiled, not minding the compliment.

“In which case, maybe we should find the gate with the shortest transfer time. I hope there’s one around here. I never want to put that hat on again.”

“Want to go looking?”

“That might be good. Maybe we can spot one with my eye... Whoa.”

Before I noticed it, the area around us had changed once again. What I had thought were buildings were now gray rocks. The ground was an unpaved road, thick with grass.

From there, the changes came quickly. The two ruts at our feet were gradually swallowed up by the thickening grass. By the time the road came to an end and we stopped walking, there was nothing but plains as far as the eye could see, both in front of us, and behind. We had arrived in the other world.

“Oooh. It worked. Nice one, Sorawo.”

“Yeah, I’m glad it did... though I’m not sure I should be.”

I wasn’t making excuses. Things were about to get crazy.

The grass at our feet was a deep green. I had thought the plains of the other

world were all dried colors, so it caught me a little by surprise. Could it have been caused by the changing seasons?

Setting that question aside, the first thing I did was remove the colored contact from my right eye. I looked around the area, verifying there were no threats nearby.

“Okay, looks like we’re fine for the moment. I’ll keep watch, so you get prepared.”

“Please do.”

Toriko set down her pack, then quickly put together the disassembled AK-101 she had been carrying in it. Tying her hair up in the back, she put on a cap, switched to leather tactical gloves, and then lifted her pack again.

“Okay, you’re next, Sorawo.”

Toriko picked up the AK and stood, taking my position as watcher. I pulled my equipment from my backpack and put it on. The Makarov went in its leg holster, like always.

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

I stood up and immediately started to move. I felt like a trained soldier, and that got me excited... But if I was still thinking that way, it just showed how inexperienced I still was. I was simply afraid of being attacked by monsters again, like before.

There was a rising slope to the east, and I had it pegged as being where the tracks were. We quickly cut across the grass that swayed in the wind, avoiding glitches as we went.

This time, I had introduced a pouch of nails to my equipment. Originally, I wanted a tool bag, like carpenters or construction workers wore around their waists with a handful of bolts inside. Even with my right eye, glitches could be hard to see in the daylight, so I had brought them to be able to throw and check, as a form of insurance. I tried imitating the way Abarato, the man we met the time we encountered Hasshaku-sama, did it, but it was a bit too heavy for me and made it hard to walk.

When I was in a hurry, I would focus my eyes rather than throw, so maybe the whole idea was a failure. If anything, I might have been better off trying to improve my daytime vision.

I led Toriko up the embankment, and when we reached the tracks, we took a breather. Now that our vantage point was higher, I took another look around the area.

The plains spread out to the east and west. Perhaps because it was daytime, I didn't spot any monsters like before. Far to the east, I could see a number of large, roundish things moving together, but whether they were living creatures or something else was beyond my ability to discern from here. Looking to the north, the tracks disappeared into the trees. They continued due south for some distance, then gently curved to the west. I thought Kisaragi Station was most likely in that direction.

"Looks fine. Let's go..."

Having said that, I looked back to Toriko, and was shocked to find her staring at my face from a distance of almost 30 centimeters away.

"...Sorawo, you really should ditch the color contact. That eye's pretty."

"Huh...? Wh-What's this, out of nowhere? No way. It stands out too much."

"Standing out's not so bad."

"It is, too! Maybe a beauty like you could pull it off, Toriko, but with my looks, heterochromia would just make me seem like an awkward otaku."

"Then why not make the rest of you look good, too?"

"You make that sound so easy."

She didn't even deny it when I called her a beauty...

"Don't talk about strange stuff, geez. Let's just go, okay...? Oops, almost forgot, one thing before that."

I set down my backpack, then pulled out a white towel.

"Tie this around your rifle. In place of a white flag."

"Like saying, 'Please, don't shoot us'? You think they'll see it's white?"

Wouldn't yellow or orange be better?"

"If it's yellow, they won't be able to tell it's a white flag."

"I don't think we need to get so hung up on tradition..." Even as she muttered to herself, Toriko tied the towel around the barrel of her AK.

"Well, I don't think they'll just up and shoot us. But just to be safe."

"Just to be safe, huh."

Raising the white flag, we walked down the tracks.

4

Holding up a white flag with a hole in it, we were lying on the ground next to the tracks.

"They just opened fire..." Toriko said.

"Th-That was dangerous! We could've died!"

The sun-baked gravel was hot, but I had no desire to raise my face from it. My head hadn't caught up with everything that had happened a moment ago. We were ambling down the tracks when, *whish*, I heard something tear through the air, and the towel fluttered. *Hm?* I thought, and then, instantly, the long echo of gunfire reached my ears. When Toriko threw herself to the ground, pulling me with her, I finally realized they had shot it.

The moment I finally tried to look ahead of us again, another bullet sailed over my head, putting another hole in the towel.

"Eek...! Isn't this a bit harsh? We came to save these guys!"

"I'll bet they have their doubts whether we're even human."

Toriko rolled onto her back, and raised the white flag so it flapped with the blue sky behind it.

"If they meant to kill us, I think we'd both be dead. They fired twice, and hit the towel both times. They're good."

“So, it’s safe to stand?”

“I’m not *that* confident. Mind if I try a little something?”

“Go for it?”

Toriko lowered the AK, and put her finger on the trigger, so I plugged my ears.

She fired one, two, three times. Then she left a shot pause, before firing three more shots. This time, there was a longer interval between each shot. Then, she fired three more shots with short intervals.

The echoes of gunfire faded into the plains.

“...SOS?”

“It’s the only Morse code I know. I should’ve gotten Mama to teach me properly,” Toriko said, sounding embarrassed. “We’re not really asking to be saved, but it should at least show them that we can talk... hopefully.”

Toriko raised the AK again. The broken white flag fluttered in the wind. This time, no bullets came flying. We each looked at the other, then finally stood up.

We returned to the tracks and started walking again. Toriko was holding up the AK, so I put my hands up, too. It was exhausting, and I was starting to regret putting my hands up without being ordered to, but then the tracks came to an end in front of us.

When we got closer, a large section had been carved out of the embankment, rails included. Looking down into the broken part, amid twisted rails and wooden slats, there was a single train lying on its side, burned pitch black.

When I looked up, on the opposite side of the break in the embankment, there were a number of Marines, and they had their guns pointed at us. I recognized the face in the center. It was the curly-haired young man with the distinctive melancholy eyes—Lieutenant Will Drake. He looked even more exhausted than last time, and wore an expression of utter disbelief.

“Oh! Hey there.”

Our eyes met, so I bowed my head despite myself. Oops... I had to ask myself, couldn’t you have made a cooler entrance? This was like the sort of lazy greeting you might give when you ran into your neighbor in an apartment

building.

“You’re the same girls... from back then?”

“Sorry for the wait. We’re here to rescue you,” Toriko said on my behalf.

When we detoured around the wreckage of the train to join up with the Marines, we headed to Kisaragi Station surrounded by filthy, emaciated soldiers.

“So, you survived. I thought you two had been hit by the train.”

“It was a close one, yeah. What happened to you guys after that?”

“That you two defeated that monster did wonders for morale. Still, we couldn’t do anything about the shortage of supplies, and we took twelve losses while searching for a way to return to the entry point.”

“That’s...”

I didn’t know what to tell him. Was there anything we could have done? Should we have been here sooner? But these guys did try to kill us. Well, not so much these guys as Sergeant Major Greg.

“Um. I want to make something clear before we meet anyone else. Yes, my eye is like this, but no, I’m not a monster. Neither is Toriko.”

“I understand.” The lieutenant nodded so easily, I was actually perplexed.

“Huh? You’re fine with that explanation?”

“Nothing has made sense since coming here... Our comrades were far more dangerous when they lost their minds. Their actions were more unstable, and made less sense, too. You’re different. Besides, you’re the ones who shot that monster dead...”

“Maybe Sergeant Major Greg doesn’t agree?”

“No... He’s already...”

When the lieutenant hesitated to say more, I got a bad feeling.

“Did something happen?”

“That time, when you two were run over by the Meat Train in front of his

eyes, he lost whatever psychological balance he had left. He launched an attack on his own authority, and succeeded in blowing away the tracks and one train using explosives, but lost his life in the battle with the Monkey Shines that came out from inside...”

Toriko and I looked at one another.

“Uh, sorry, you two shouldn’t let it weigh on you. He was already at his limit. He feared being swallowed up by the Otherside and losing his heart more than anyone, so maybe it’s fortunate he was able to die in battle.”

He said that, but...

“That train had already taken away a number of our comrades. It looked like they were trapped inside, so we had been hesitant to attack, but the sergeant major was able to cross that line. Maybe we should have acted sooner...”

While I was walking beside the mournful lieutenant, I had other things on my mind. How was I to interpret the fact that the sergeant major had been able to destroy an entity from the other world?

My eye was likely able to adjust the perception layer in a way that allowed us to hit monsters from the other world with our bullets. If the sergeant major’s explosives were able to have an effect on the train, did that not mean he was able to match his perception layer to that of the train?

Did it happen because he lost his mind? Basically... did going insane bring humans closer to entities from this place?

While I was thinking about this, the line of troops with the lieutenant and us at the center of it arrived at Kisaragi Station. Seeing it during the day, it was exactly what you’d expect from an abandoned station in the countryside. Maybe because it was summer now, but the grass by the sides of the tracks had grown quite long. The one difference from the surface world was the complete absence of the chirping of cicadas and birds.

“So, the trains don’t come anymore, then.”

“No. They still come,” the lieutenant replied to Toriko in a monotonous voice.

When we passed through the ticket gate and entered the camp, the soldiers' cries of surprise surrounded us.

It's those two. Didn't they die? What's with that eye? I could imagine them saying things like that in English, but they just stared at us from a distance. Looking at them under the light of day, their eyes were sunken, and they looked like their cheeks had been hollowed out with a spoon. Their exhaustion was readily apparent.

The lieutenant ignored the voices seeking explanation as he led us to a tent.

"Major, we're coming in."

When we entered, the tall Major Ray Barker quickly rose to his feet. His light-hued eyes glared at us, without a hint of dropping his guard.

"You're—"

"The Girls have come to save us, Major."

For some reason, the lieutenant sounded proud. Apparently, that had become our code name at some point.

5

Though this should have been obvious, the major took the news we had come to rescue them with suspicion. Yet the moment I told him I could see glitches—what they called 'bear traps'—his expression changed.

"Is that true? If it is, it changes the situation entirely."

"We can escape, Major," the lieutenant said with heated passion. When we met up at the railway tracks, the lieutenant had already seen a demonstration of my powers. The major seemed to be keeping his cool; he was sitting back in his chair with his hands on his desk.

On top of that desk was the map of the surrounding area that they had been able to put together, taking casualties as they did. On top of a proper grid, it showed the tracks running through the plains to the station building, with defensive lines drawn in.

Their theoretical entry point—the gate they wandered through while on a training exercise—was estimated to be in the middle of a forest roughly five kilometers from here. It was only five kilometers, but once you factored in an invisible minefield, those five kilometers seemed despair-inducingly far.

The major thought in silence for a while, then suddenly looked at me and Toriko with sharp eyes.

“You’ve brought us very good news. If it’s true, you’re more reliable than any cavalry team. But I have just one question: why didn’t you say that last time?”

“Oh... Yeah, about that.”

It was a fair question, especially from a man responsible for the lives of all his subordinates. When I hesitated to answer it, Toriko cut in bluntly. “Everyone was so on-edge that time. If we’d said one wrong word, I’ll bet you’d have shot us.”

“What made you think that...” the major started to say, then looked at the lieutenant. “...Ahh, maybe there was some risk of that.” He took a deep breath, then closed his eyes. “That’s fair, you’re right. Forgive me. If you’ve come back into this hell to save us, I can’t thank you enough.”

“That’s cool, but we actually have a favor to ask in return.” I felt awkward about the apology, so I spoke up despite myself.

“I don’t believe we’re in a position to offer you much, but please, ask away.”

“Really?! Okay, could you give us guns?”

“Guns...?”

“Yeah, and bullets, too. If you have any to spare, that is.”

A shadow of bewilderment fell over the major and lieutenants’ faces. I was rushing things too much, so Toriko pulled on my sleeve.

“Sorawo, Sorawo.”

“Huh? What?”

“I think there’s a better way to broach the subject... Here, let me take over for a bit.”

Toriko stepped up and started speaking to them in English. Instantly, there was a flash of understanding on both their faces.

Sure, sure, of course you need guns here. But no grenades. Only small arms. Okay? No problem. Thank you so much.

The conversation was over in no time.

“They say it’s cool.”

“What did you tell them?” I asked.

“We don’t feel safe with the weapons we have on hand, so we’d like them to lend us some until we escape.”

How was that any different from what I said? I was trying to explain it to them just like that.

Before I could accept what just happened, the major said to the lieutenant, “Is anyone out on reconnaissance?”

“No, sir. The survivors are all in camp.”

“Okay. We’ll move while it’s still light out. Prepare to pull out. Send a few guys my way. You show these girls to the Doghouse, then oversee the preparations to withdraw.”

“Yes, sir.”

The lieutenant gave him a firm salute, then turned back to us.

“Please, come with me. I’ll take you to the armory first.”

Once we followed the lieutenant outside, Toriko spoke up, complaining. “Sorawo, you moved too fast.”

“Don’t they say you’re supposed to cut to the chase in English?”

“But you weren’t speaking English, were you, Sorawo?”

Walking shoulder to shoulder with an unamused Toriko, we followed the lieutenant.

“I hope we’ll have something suited to someone of your build,” the lieutenant

said inside the tent being used as an armory.

It was true that many of the guns on the racks were large, and I was at a loss for what to do with them lined up in front of me.

“I just need the bullets.” Toriko approached the ammo shelf. “Can I have this?”

“That’s 5.56 NATO. Toriko-san, your gun is an AK, isn’t it?”

“This is an AK-101. It’s a low caliber, so I originally thought it took 5.45. It’s black, too, which I thought was weird for an AK.”

Deciding to let the rest of whatever incantations they were speaking go in one ear and out the other, I perused the weapon racks. I already had the Makarov, so I didn’t need another handgun. The shotguns were tempting; they had some resembling Kozakura’s Remington here.

As I was staring at a rack with the sort of assault rifles you saw all the time in movies lined up on it, Toriko and the lieutenant finished their talk and came over.

“That’s an M4. It’s a gun we’re all used to using.”

“Maybe it’s a bit big for me... Which one’s the gun I shot with last time I was here?”

“Could it have been the M14?”

The lieutenant picked up a long-barreled rifle for me. It was the one I’d fired while Toriko supported me last time I was at Kisaragi Station. Now that I was holding it again... Yeah, it really was heavy. It might be a bit exhausting to carry around.

“Do you have a lighter version of this?”

“Sorry. We don’t have that many kinds of sniper rifles.”

“Sorawo, you like rifles?” Toriko asked curiously.

“I was thinking one might be a good match for my eye.”

I had been thinking it would be handy if I could look through the scope with my right eye’s ability and snipe them, like I did to the monster at Kisaragi

Station.

“Obviously, I don’t think I’m able to become a proper sniper, so the best I can hope to do is to imitate one.”

“If you’re able to maintain some distance, how would this work?”

The lieutenant pulled a compact assault rifle that was shaped like an M4, but had a shorter barrel.

“It’s an M4 CQBR. Try holding it. It’s a lot lighter than the M14, right? They shortened the barrel of an M4 to make it easier to maneuver with indoors, but I think this might actually be easier to use for your intended usage, Sorawo-san. You’re not looking to get into a shoot-out with other humans, right?”

“R-Right. If it’s easy to use when we come up against monsters, that’s enough. I just want to shoot them before they get close to me,” I responded, even as I was confused by the lieutenant’s sudden eloquence. He gave me a big nod.

“Got it. Naturally, it doesn’t have the same ability to focus fire as a sniper rifle, but let’s compensate for that with a scope. Were there any other optional parts you wanted to put on it?”

He said that with the same ease you might say, *Would you like fries with that?*

“Err, I don’t really know, so I’ll leave it up to you.”

“Well, how about this? An ACOG 4x scope, a rail handguard and vertical foregrip, and a Magpul CTR stock...”

“Whoa, hold on. What?”

The lieutenant pulled parts off the rack like he was shopping at the supermarket, handing them to me one after another.

“Do you need a dot sight or a SureFire...? Those would make it heavier, which might be more of a hindrance. Let’s not do that. You want it as light as possible, right?”

“Oh! Yes.”

“Toriko-san, would you know how to attach all this?”

“Well, probably,” Toriko responded, surprised.

“Glad to hear it. Anything else you need? If we’re done, then please follow me.”

The lieutenant left the armory, and walked speedily to our destination. Carrying a new gun and a variety of parts for it, I rushed after him. “Um, is it okay for you to be so generous to us?”

“Yeah. It’s not like we can take most of the stuff here with us.”

The camp had gotten rather busy. We passed a column of Marines as we headed to a place on the outer edge where a number of vehicles were parked. There was a large jeep-like vehicle, a number of large trucks, and an armored car with the barrel of a machine gun sticking out through the roof. There were vehicles that had been dismantled and had their tires removed.

In the middle of all that, I could see two bizarrely-shaped vehicles that stood out from the rest. They both had rough and angular bodies sitting on fat octagonal pillars. They had a lot of peepholes, and I could see something like an armored viewing platform on the top of them, too. There were a number of soldiers doing welding work on top of the vehicles, producing a lot of noise and sparks.

What was this? I looked at Toriko, but she shook her head to say she didn’t know. In the middle of all that noisy welding, the lieutenant spoke. “The Israeli forces have an Armored Personnel Carrier called the Nagmachon. It’s a vehicle made strictly for the purpose of going into the Palestinian Territories and fighting personnel. The unique feature of it is they removed the turret from a tank, and instead installed a sealed combat room called the Doghouse. They can look out through the windows, and point their guns in all directions. It’s a hedgehog-like vehicle, specialized for killing humans.”

There were disgusting weapons like that...? Not noticing I was a little put off by this, the lieutenant continued his explanation.

“We brought an explosion-resistant vehicle called an MRAP to the Otherside, but the threats to us here weren’t explosives or terrorists with anti-tank weapons. The bear traps are like IEDs, in that they’re a threat that exists on the road, but... If anything, I see our situation as akin to IDF soldiers on reconnaissance or a mission, or maintaining security in the Palestinian

Territories. That's why we made them. Our own Nagmachon Doghouse."

He sounded like he was bragging about a toy.

"This one with an arm on the front of the body is the Gorgon. It's based on a Buffalo mine-sweeping vehicle. The armored school bus behind it is the Owlbear, based on an RG-33L armored vehicle. They both have a Doghouse based on a modified OGPK turret kit, allowing attack in all directions. We know it's all over if we step in a bear trap, but these were made to be our last hope. With you here, they can do their job. I'm really glad."

"Th-They sure are amazing, huh."

I just barely managed to get that much out. I didn't have a lot of practice at keeping a conversation going while a man bragged, so I had no idea how I was supposed to respond here.

"Wow." That one word was all Toriko said. It still made the lieutenant smile, and he looked up at the monster of armor and gun turrets with pride.

"Please wait here a moment. Everyone will gather around quickly."

With the welding done, the soldiers came down from on top of the vehicle. The lieutenant gave some quick orders, and then two stood sentry while the rest rushed off.

"...Don't you think we could have complimented him a bit more?"

"If he's satisfied, I'd say it's fine. Could you pass me yours, Sorawo?"

"Which?"

"All of them."

When I turned over the gun I was holding and the optional parts for it, Toriko sat down where she was and began dismantling the gun. I sat on the Gorgon's ridiculously huge tires and watched the soldiers' hasty preparations for withdrawal in a daze. *I wonder what they'll do with the tents*, I thought, but they showed no sign of folding them up. It looked like, as the lieutenant had said, they meant to leave almost all of their equipment behind here.

Hmm... Couldn't we come back for this later?

I was watching two soldiers put a red and black cable around the camp while thinking about how to pillage their equipment when Toriko spoke. “Lieutenant, you really managed to assemble a light set of parts. It might even be lighter with these.” She sounded impressed. Toriko removed her tactical glove and skillfully went about disassembling the gun and swapping out parts. Her ghostly translucent fingers slid across the body of the gun as though she were playing an instrument. I stared, despite myself.

“...You’re good at that, Toriko.”

“Disassembling a gun is surprisingly easy once you’ve actually tried it.”

“Did you learn that from your parents, too? They were Canadian, right?”

“Hmm. Yeah, they are. Did I mention that?”

“Sorry, I heard from Kozakura-san.”

“Oh. Mama was, yeah. She was in the Canadian military.”

“Oh, I see.”

I had thought her father was the soldier, so this surprised me. Now that I thought about it, when she fired the gun using Morse code, she mentioned her mom then, too.

“There, done. Try holding it.”

The gun she handed me was surprisingly light, compared to how rough it looked. The earth-colored custom parts stood out against the black barrel, making it look surprisingly stylish... I guess?

“Ohh, it really does feel light.”

“Doesn’t it, though? Use it for a while, and if it doesn’t feel like it’s working well enough for you, you can customize it again.”

“I dunno if I’ll be using it that much.”

“Could you stand there for a bit? Hold the gun in both hands.”

I stayed standing in front of the Gorgon, while Toriko took about ten steps back and put her fingers out in the shape of a frame, like she was taking a picture of me. “Yeah, it suits you.”

“Is that something I should be happy about?”

“Take the compliment for what it is.”

“Well, fine. How should I hold it?” I asked.

“I’ll teach you. Come this way.”

Toriko pulled my hand and led me around behind the Gorgon and Owlbear; the two sentries eyed us suspiciously.

“The basic thing is to put the stock against your shoulder like this, and look through the scope. You can hold the handguard with your left hand, or you can hold the foregrip, too. There are some people who hold it in front of the magazine catch, too, though.”

“Like this? Is this it?” While I struggled with the unfamiliar assault rifle, Toriko reached around from behind me to adjust my stance.

“Don’t spread your elbows so wide. Keep yourself compact.”

Wrapping her arms around me from behind, she pressed my elbows in, and put both her hands on the gun. I could see Toriko’s face beside mine, so close our cheeks might touch. Her eyes were in the distance instead of on me, but for some reason I felt even more stirred up than when we each looked into the other’s eyes. I dragged my attention away from her long blonde hair, and tried to focus on where the muzzle was pointing.

“Feel like you’re hiding yourself behind the gun. If you act like both your arms are fixed to the gun, your body will move quickly with it.”

Her directions for me were sharp, and she was a bit different from usual. The person who taught her to use a gun, her mother, might have behaved in a way similar to this.

“It’s longer than a handgun, so always be aware of where the muzzle is pointing. Never put your finger on the trigger when you don’t intend to fire. Okay?”

“O-Okay.”

“Good!”

Once she had gone over how to remove the magazine, and explained the safety and how to select the mode of fire, Toriko and I turned around and went back to where we'd been before.

When we moved around in front of the Gorgon, we were met by a line of dozens of fully-armed Marines looking at us. The major and the lieutenant were standing in front of them, and the major had just been in the middle of speaking to his men in English.

The major looked at us, then spread his arms wide and introduced us. I feel like whatever he said meant something along the lines of: *The Girls have come to guide us out of the Otherside.*

The sharp glares of Marines with sunken cheeks pierced me, and I froze solid. Maybe I should have said something like, "Uh, hi," but their desperation, like they were hanging on to the edge of despair with just one finger, wasn't something I could stand to face with a silly grin.

The major nodded to the lieutenant and took a step back. The lieutenant stepped forward and raised his voice. *Okay, guys! Get in the vehicles! Move it! Hoorah!* The Marines cheered, and all went into motion at once.

The diesel engines of the Gorgon and Owlbear whirred to life. The soldiers piled into the other vehicles that could still move, too. Not everyone could ride. Those who were left over spread out to a fixed distance, and remained alert with their guns pointing in all directions.

The major came over to Toriko and me, who were standing close together.

"We'll be using all of our remaining fuel reserves. You two are our last hope. Please, get us home," the major said.

I was so intimidated that I simply nodded, unable to say a word.

The lieutenant returned and waved to us. "Please, get in the lead car. We'll be counting on you to lead the way."

With the lieutenant dragging us along, we climbed on board the Gorgon. The body of the vehicle was ridiculously high; we boarded from the rear, then climbed a ladder leading up to the newly added combat room. When I went

through the hatch in the ceiling, I could see a fairly wide area around the vehicle. It felt like I was looking down from the roof of a two-story house. Right next to us, looking like a folded fork used by a giant or something, there was an arm meant for dealing with mines.

Toriko came up after me, and we sat down side-by-side on top of the turret. The engine revved up, and the vehicle slowly began to move. The lead car was the Gorgon, with Toriko, the lieutenant, and me aboard. The rear car, with three other vehicles between us, was the Owlbear. The line of vehicles slowly advanced, leaving the camp at Kisaragi Station. It was half past three in the afternoon. We didn't have much time left before sunset.

6

I squinted out from the top of the Gorgon, trying to find that silver shimmering in the grassy summer fields. The whole area was riddled with glitches. If you couldn't see these, there was probably no avoiding them. In the areas where they were thickest, they blocked us like walls, and we had to route around them looking for gaps large enough to allow a vehicle or group of people to pass through.

It was more difficult giving directions than I had thought. Left, right, straight, a little to the right, stop, a touch left, back up five meters, thirty degrees to the right... and so on, and so on. I tried a bunch of things out at first, but there were limits to how subtly I could control them with just words.

The first fifty confused minutes were behind us now, and we hadn't even made it a hundred meters from the camp. This was no good... Sweating under the silent pressure from inside the vehicle and the convoy behind us, I carefully considered what I should do.

"Sorawo, you okay?" Toriko asked, bringing her face close to mine.

"I'm okay... Lieutenant, do you have a long stick? One that could reach the driver's seat from here."

"Let me take a look."

After a little while, I was passed a long extending metal rod from down below. The end split into two, and each end of the T was rounded so you could hook something with it.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a pole for hanging an IV drip pack.”

When I fully extended it, the tip just reached the driver’s glass window.

“Please, proceed in the direction I indicate with this. When I want you to stop, I’ll tap twice. At any other time, you’re good to keep going at the same speed.”

If I hooked it on a gap in the ordinance disposal arm, I didn’t need to constantly hold the IV pole in place, too. When I threw a bolt into a nearby glitch, it melted it, or flashed, or emitted a strange sound, making the soldiers jump every time. I had been thinking that bringing the nail bag and bolts was a waste of effort, but they were handy for making other people aware of danger.

We had been making good progress for a while when there was a bright flash behind us. I turned to see a massive explosion swelling at the former site of the camp.

When the roar of the explosion and its shock wave reached us, they made my whole body shake. After watching the fireball and the rising black smoke in shocked silence with Toriko, I panicked and shoved my head down inside the vehicle.

“Lieutenant?! The camp!”

“Yes? Ohh, right. You weren’t told, were you? It’s fine. This was a deliberate detonation.”

I was taken aback by his cool-headed response.

“Wh-Why?!”

“We’d left too many traces of our presence. With this, now the abominable Station February is just a pile of rubble.”

“I-I see.”

That was the end of my plan to help myself to the supplies left in their camp. I

went back to look-out duty, still not quite over the shock.

“Sorawo, what’s wrong? Focus.”

“I know I have to, but... Ugh.” I let a sigh of disappointment escape despite myself.

“...Were you thinking of doing something bad?” Her tone was suspicious, and I averted my eyes.

The convoy continued across the plains of death. When I poked it in the nose with the IV pole, the diesel beast beneath us obediently changed direction. It felt like I was leading a horse with a carrot.

Maybe an hour and a half passed. The number of glitches gradually dropped, and I didn’t have to make fine changes to our course anymore. Low bushes started to become noticeable in the area around us. When we crossed a hill covered in thick, green moss, I could see a gloomy forest down at the bottom of the slope.

“Come up here, Lieutenant.”

When I called into the vehicle, the lieutenant climbed up the ladder and poked his head out through the hatch.

“Did something happen?”

“That forest... Are you sure it’s the place you all came out of?”

The lieutenant looked down at the map, thinking for a moment before raising his face again.

“Most likely. It was at night, so we didn’t have a complete grasp of the situation, but judging from the distance and direction of the camp, it seems highly probable.”

“Then we’re almost there, huh?” Though he nodded in response to Toriko, the lieutenant looked towards the forest with his expression still tense. Even as we were talking, the convoy continued through the valley. There were no glitches ahead of us. If we went straight like this, we would continue into the woods.

As I rubbed the back of my head, which felt stiff with eyestrain, there was a

commotion from the rear of the convoy.

The lieutenant confirmed the situation with one of his subordinates, then furrowed his brow.

“What’s up?”

“They say someone’s coming.” That was all the lieutenant said before descending the ladder.

Someone...?

When I turned around, the soldiers were stretching their necks, looking behind us with concern. We had just finished descending the gentle slope. I could see someone standing on the ridge at the top of the hill.

Inside the car, the lieutenant and his men had a hurried exchange in English. When they did that, I could barely understand a thing. Without using the radio, they were hearing a report from the rear cars delivered by messenger.

“Toriko, can you tell what they’re saying?”

Toriko, who had her ears perked up, was mumbling to herself suspiciously. “He’s saying... Don’t leave, take me with you...?”

“There was a survivor, then?” I tapped the front window with the IV pole to get them to stop, then I peered through the M4’s scope. It was a short scope, so it was easier to look through it if I placed the stock against my shoulder.

What I saw with my right eye, magnified four times, was certainly human. He was dressed the same as the other Marines. A faded camo uniform, body armor and a helmet. He carried a gun that looked like mine, and was waving his arms this way. I couldn’t see his face, though. It might have been the light levels here, but under his helmet was awfully dark...

I focused my spirit into my right eye, and his form changed entirely. He still just barely looked like a man in camouflage, but his body was a mess, like a chunk of the ground covered in dead leaves had stood up. He didn’t even have arms. The cut on his shoulder was covered in something like moss. His face was covered in the same stuff, and I couldn’t see his expression. Moss spilled out of his open mouth.

“Blech...” As I shuddered, another fake soldier appeared on the ridge. Then another. And yet another. One after another, the mossmen increased in number. There were some who only had one arm, others missing half a head, yet others with deep gashes in their torsos...

“Lieutenant—those aren’t survivors! It’s the enemy!”

When I raised the alarm, the lieutenant shouted inside the car.

“Contact! Open fire!”

As if they had heard those orders, the mossmen began rushing towards us. *Fire! Open fire!* The orders were quickly passed through the convoy, and the Owlbear at the very rear opened fire. The gun turret spun around, and the muzzle spat fire.

Next, the soldiers scattered around the convoy opened fire. When a bullet hit, the moss scattered into geometrical fractals. When a number of shots had hit, the mossmen flipped over and then fell to the ground as red and green shards scattered everywhere.

“Get inside quick, you two. It’s dangerous,” the lieutenant called out to us with urgency, but I shook my head.

“We can’t. If I’m not here watching, the bullets won’t hit.”

“But...”

“Lieutenant, don’t worry, just shoot! We’ll be fine!” Toriko stuck her head down into the car to shout, then closed the hatch at her feet and put her hands on my shoulders.

“I’ll stay with you.”

“Yeah.”

I gave a little nod, then stood on top of the gun turret, doing so to widen my field of vision as much as possible. Toriko was still kneeling, holding her AK at the ready. The muzzles of guns stuck out from the combat room below, and the Gorgon opened fire, too. I thought maybe I ought to shoot as well, but opted against it. It was dangerous to limit my field of vision. I was this convoy’s lifeline, after all.

“Toriko, could you tell me if the enemy comes in from the sides?”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

There were mossmen all over the ridge to our rear. They dashed down the hill at full speed, only to be caught by my right eye and the bullets, and they were dropping like flies. It felt like the unceasing roar of gunfire was going to drive me crazy.

In order to ensure none slipped through, I turned my head back and forth like a searchlight, desperately trying to catch enemies in my field of vision, but they kept on appearing. We were gradually being surrounded.

“Sorawo, isn’t it bad for us to stay here?”

“It is, yeah. We’ve got to move.”

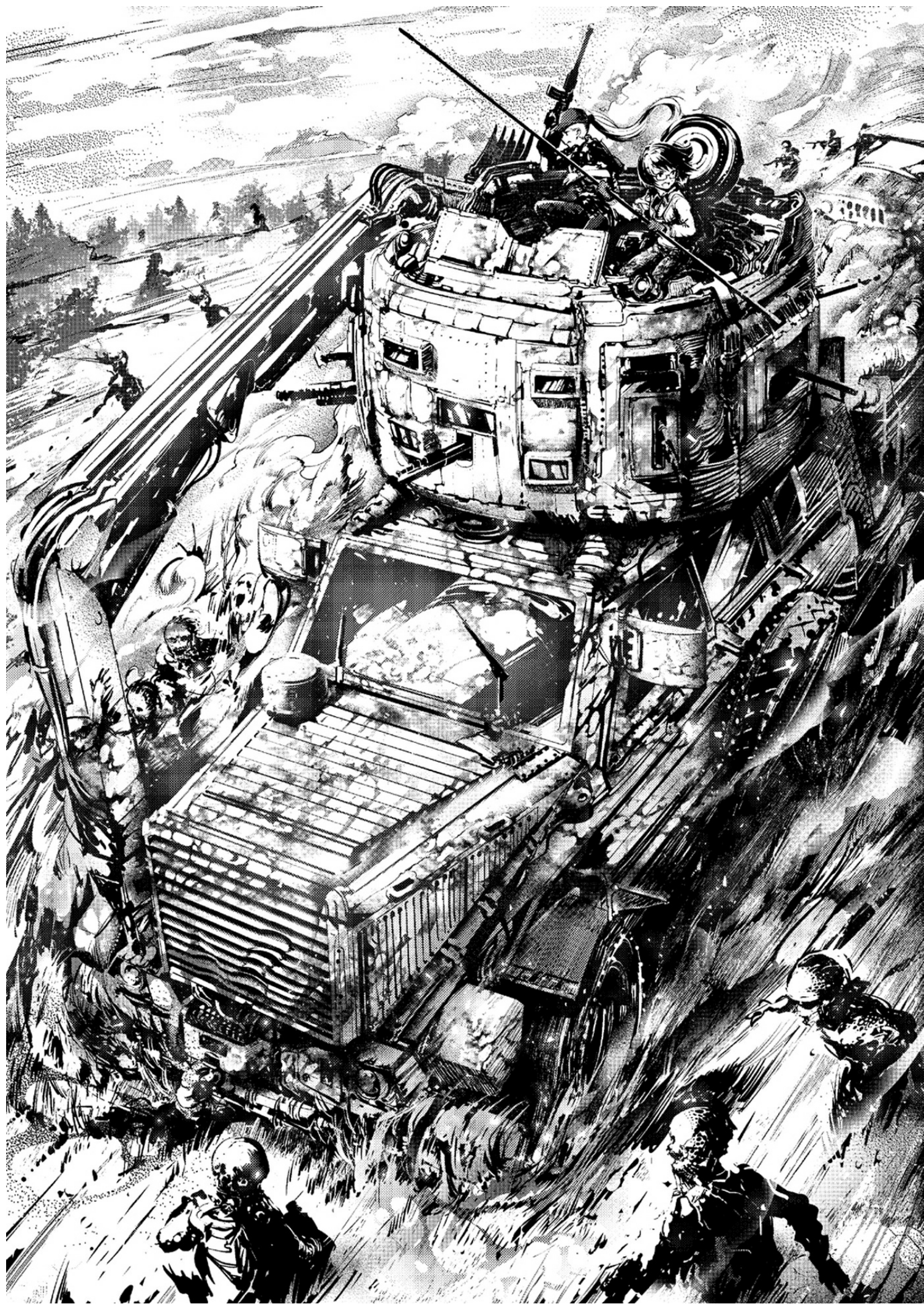
Toriko opened the hatch and shouted down at the soldiers who were firing in the combat room.

“We’re moving! Tell the people in the rear, too!”

I tapped the front of the window with the IV pole. The Gorgon let out a burst of exhaust, then began moving forward once again. While I kept an eye on the enemies closing in from the rear, I also looked for openings to check if it was safe ahead of us. I was way too busy!

The Gorgon, which had picked up speed going downhill, mowed down the grass as it sped along. Toriko and I clung on to the edge of the turret, trying not to be shaken off the top of the bouncing vehicle.

When we got right next to it, I noticed there was a metal fence that was close to two meters high going around the forest. It had rusty barbed wire and a number of red cords wrapped around it. There wasn’t the glow that indicated a glitch. When the Gorgon ran into it, the folded arm on the nose of the vehicle easily tore through the fence. The barbed wire that had been severed made a *boing, boing* sound as it bounced around very close to us.



“Watch your head!”

Toriko pulled me out of the way right in the nick of time as a large branch scraped the top of the gun turret. We lost our balance and fell into the hatch. Bouncing off the thick shoulders, backs, butts, and legs of the three soldiers who were firing out from inside the combat room, we finally tumbled to the floor of the vehicle.

“Oww...”

“A-Are you okay, Sorawo?” Toriko stammered.

“Somehow...”

Even though we struggled to disentangle ourselves, we managed to stand up somehow.

“Girls, is it okay to keep going this way?!” the driver yelled to us, and I went to look out the front window. I couldn’t see any silver phosphorescence out in the gloomy woods. It was creepy how safe it seemed.

“It’s okay. Please, keep driving at a gentle speed.”

I left those instructions for the driver and then turned around and hurried back through the vehicle.

On the deck at the rear of the vehicle, Toriko and the lieutenant had their guns pointing behind us. On the other side of the vehicles and the soldiers who were shooting the enemy as they retreated, a large number of mossmen were closing in. Because my line of sight had been interrupted, it looked like they were almost on top of us now. The moment I went out on the deck and my field of vision opened up, mossmen started going down in a hail of bullets left and right.

Did I make it? Or did they get some of us? How many? I dispelled the questions forming in my head. *Don’t think! This isn’t the time to be thinking about the number of victims.*

The lieutenant placed his gun on the railing of the deck, just firing off one shot after another. The lieutenant’s gun was also an M4, but the barrel was pretty heavy, and the scope was large, too. With each shot, the head of a mossman

that was pretty far away would burst, and they would flip over and collapse to the ground.

“...He’s good,” Toriko whispered to herself, looking at the lieutenant.

Following the Gorgon, the rest of the convoy continued into the forest. The enemy attack stopped, and on the other side of the slope scattered with the remains of mossmen, there were a large number of figures on the ridge, looking down at us. One shadow was especially large. It was just a silhouette, but it was humanoid, with complexly branched horns, and beside it was a long, slim four-legged monster that resembled a giraffe with no head.

It’s him! It was the monster who appeared before me and Toriko the first time we entered the other world at night. I had heard that the four-legged beast was a robot that the Marines had brought in here that had stepped into a glitch.

When the lieutenant fired into the air, the head between the horns exploded beautifully.

Nice! I thought, but it was short-lived. The monster’s head acted as if it was a video being played backwards until it had returned to its original state.

“The Horned Man... He’s a hunter from the Otherside who persistently hunted us over this past month and a half.” There was an anger in the lieutenant’s voice that he couldn’t suppress, but I was in such shock I didn’t have time to worry about that. I was looking, but he didn’t go down! I knew I had him captured in my right eye, too!

The bullet most definitely hit, and it had an effect for a time, too. But after that, the Horned Man regenerated. It looked like there were guys in the other world who couldn’t be neutralized just by hitting them with a bullet.

“...He’s not coming after us, huh?” Toriko lowered her AK.

The enemies came no closer. The convoy proceeded into the forest, and the Horned Man and the mossmen faded out of view.

I was still in shock when the driver yelled to me. “Girls, give us directions!”

“R-Right!” Coming back to my senses, Toriko and I rushed down from the gun turret. I put my hand on the ladder to climb down, but the soldiers in the

combat room held up a hand to stop me. They turned their palms towards me, telling me not to come down.

“The branches are right above us, so it’s dangerous,” I said.

Toriko interpreted for me. It was true—I’d nearly been knocked off earlier.

The field of view from the driver’s seat wasn’t that great. I couldn’t see any glitches ahead of us now, but if there was something in the trees overhead, or in a blind spot to the left or right, I might discover it too late.

I thought for a moment. “...Toriko, I’m going outside for a bit. Would you come along?”

“Of course.” Toriko nodded without even hesitating.

We returned to the rear deck of the vehicle again; we were running all over the place. When we told the lieutenant, who was receiving a report from a messenger, that we would be heading back outside, his eyes went wide.

“It’s dangerous out there... Though, I guess that goes without saying.”

“We’ll be together, so it’s okay. It’s too hard to see from inside the car, so it’s actually more dangerous for me to be here.”

Leaving him with those words, Toriko and I climbed the ladder from the slow-moving Gorgon’s deck and hopped down to the ground. The soldiers in the rear looked at us with surprise.

We ran alongside the Gorgon, and then went out the front of it. Toriko and I started walking at the head of a convoy consisting of dozens of soldiers and five military vehicles.

7

The sun hadn’t set yet, but the forest was already dark. The twilight that shone down through the forest canopy barely illuminated the area, but as we continued on, that light weakened, too. The Gorgon turned on its headlights, causing us to cast long shadows as we walked in front of it.

We turned around in response to footsteps behind us, and saw four of the

soldiers had caught up. They nodded to us, then stayed about five meters back, carefully watching the surrounding area as we advanced. It looked like they trusted us enough that they were willing to protect us.

One dug through his pouch, then tossed a small package to us. Toriko caught it. Inside the package were two cookies. There were candy-coated chocolates of all colors embedded in them. Judging from the simple packaging, he was likely sharing some of his military ration with us.

In return, I tried giving him some of the bite-sized salty youkan jelly that I had brought as food on the go. The soldier accepted it, and flashed his white teeth at me for the first time.

Toriko and I each took a cookie, bit into it, then looked at each other. The oil had seeped into the dough, and it was all sticky and sweet. Frankly, it tasted awful. When I looked at the guys behind us, the soldiers were looking at the black blob that had come out of the salty youkan package with an expression that said, *What even is this?*

Toriko leaned in close and whispered. “Too bad you didn’t bring some better food along!”

“Uh, yeah, sure. We should’ve made boxed lunches for them or something, huh?”

I intended it as a joke, but Toriko’s face lit up.

“I like it! Let’s make them later!”

“...Huh? Are you serious?”

Just as I asked her that, in the headlights up ahead, I saw a rope that was starting to rot, tied to the trunks of two trees.

When we approached, the area past there was open, with no trees growing there. Toriko pulled her own light out of her bag, and then used it to illuminate the area beyond the rope. It was a hexagonal space, made by tying ropes to connect six thick trees. There was a box, which was about the size of an offering box at a shrine, that had been left in the middle of the space, and it emitted a silver light. When I viewed it with my right eye, I could see something overlapping with where the offering box should have been.

“It’s a glitch—or maybe a gate,” I said. Toriko held up her hand to the people behind us, signaling for them to stop. The convoy halted. The lieutenant disembarked from the Gorgon and rushed over, looking over our shoulders with the four soldiers.

“Isn’t this your entry point?” I asked. The lieutenant thought about it.

“You... could be right. It’s true, I feel like I’ve seen this light before...”

He was being awfully vague.

“This place is pretty distinctive. You really should remember if you’ve seen it before, shouldn’t you?”

“I should, yes, but the memory is fuzzy.” The lieutenant’s brow furrowed as he looked down. The sweat beaded on his forehead, then began to run down his face.

“It’s... coming back to me. That’s right. We definitely were here... We were in the mountains, then before we knew it, we were here... Then...”

The lieutenant suddenly looked up. His eyes had gone wide.

“...We saw something, something terrifying.”

I was shocked to realize that the other four soldiers were all making the same expression. It was a hollow, frightened expression. Like they were re-experiencing a terror hidden deep in their memories. They stood there in a daze, like young children who had woken from a nightmare.

Toriko and I looked at one another. This fear was abnormal.

“Stay here. We’ll take a look,” I said, and the lieutenant slowly nodded.

Lifting up the rope, Toriko and I entered the open space together. There was a scrunching sound beneath me, and I looked down. I was stepping on some paper. It was cut in a zigzag shape, like the sort of paper hung from the *shimenawa*, enclosing ropes, at shrines... What was that called again...? *Shide*, right.

Then, was that old rope a *shimenawa*?

I approached the box in the center. The box was wooden, with metal bits

reinforcing the corners. They were rusted, as if they had been exposed to wind and rain for a long time. There was a mesh on the top of the box, but there was a board beneath it, so I couldn't actually see inside. The side of the box bore a number of symbols drawn in chalk which looked like family seals. I moved around to the back side, and a board there had been removed, allowing me to see inside. There were four thin pots lying on their side, and traces of some liquid having been spilled over the surface. There was something super small, in the shape of a stick, lying there. In the middle of the fully dried stain, there were three V-shaped spaces that were clean.

...Could this be?

Just as a name came to me from my knowledge of netlore, Toriko tapped me on the shoulder silently.

I turned around, and a hoarse squeak escaped my throat.

At the root of one of the trees surrounding the plaza, I saw a face. It was a woman's face. Her mouth was open wide from side to side, her top and bottom teeth bared. Toriko's flashlight shone directly on her, but the eyes that stared back at me did not blink.

This must have been how the birds felt when they looked at one of those eyeball patterns meant to keep them away. In the middle of the two eyes, which were opened unnaturally wide, two round, pitch black pupils were staring in our direction. That expression, which displayed nothing but malice, was terrifying.

I heard gasps from the lieutenant and the soldiers, too. They had followed our gaze and seen her.

"It's her," the lieutenant said with a moan. "The one we saw, it was her..."

With her eyes still completely fixated on me, the woman's face rose up alongside the trunk of the tree. It continued to rise after reaching a person's height, then stopped at six meters high.

Toriko's hand on my shoulder was trembling, too. Unable to look away, I could feel the panic bubbling and seething inside me. With a shout that was like a scream, I cried out, "To-Toriko—Shoot! Hurry!"

“Ro... Roger!”

Toriko seemed to snap back to her senses, pulling the trigger on her AK.

Almost simultaneously, the soldiers opened fire. The intense roar of assault rifles blew away the silence in the forest. The fire from their muzzles was blindingly bright to our eyes, which had adjusted to the darkness.

When the woman was shot, her jaw dropped. *Ching, ching! Ching, ching, ching!* The sharp sound of bells rang from inside her gaping maw, and for an instant, I felt a prickling pain rush through my arms and legs.

Suddenly, hands appeared next to the woman’s face on the trunk. Three long-fingered left hands. On the neighboring trunk, fingers appeared. This time, it was three right hands. Using the left and right trees as supports, suddenly the form of a six-armed, naked woman rose up into the light. From the waist down, her body wasn’t human, but that of a snake covered in glistening scales.

In one corner of my paralyzed mind, I came to a conclusion.

I thought so. I know who she is.

“Kankandara.”

There was an internet ghost story where three delinquent boys entered a forest that was off-limits, and encountered a monster that was half-person, half-snake. That monster’s name was Kankandara. The kanji used, 姦姦蛇螺, were likely chosen for their visual appearance, rather than their meaning, to represent a six-armed woman (女), with the lower body of a snake. Looking at her directly, her appearance, which was less like that of a ghost and more like the kind of monster that might appear in a movie or video game, was more than just overwhelming.

Her snake body, which was just thick enough you could barely wrap your arms around it, slithering along, bringing Kankandara out into the open space. Even her apparently human parts—the six arms, from their shoulder joints, down to their finger joints, writhed like they belonged to some legless insect.

When the lieutenant called out behind him, soldiers came running. They scattered around the area, both inside and outside the rope, and opened fire one after another. Exposed to the line of fire, Kankandara’s body shook and

convulsed, and there was a loud sound, like hundreds of bells ringing in unison.

“Aghh!” Toriko let out a sharp cry. The soldiers and I called out in pain and staggered, too.

It hurt—both my arms and both my legs hurt! It was a prickling pain, like I had been burned, and it made me groan despite myself.

The Marines were all suffering from it, too. There were soldiers who fell down, like their limbs had gone rigid, and thrashed around on the ground, too, and the pain I felt was getting stronger. Not good!

As I resisted the terror and pain, I focused my consciousness into my right eye. Kankandara’s body faded, and I started to see another pattern.

That terrifying face was gone, and even the six distinctive arms vanished.

What was there instead were six pieces of square timber moving together. I called them square timber, but they didn’t look like they were actually made of wood. They were whitish objects of some unknown substance. There were three V-shapes connected together, and they moved in this sort of spinning, tumbling way that was like how a snake moved, but also different. Just the points where the pieces of square timber touched were painted red, so, in a way, it looked somewhat like a match puzzle. There were bullet holes gouged out of the surface, but that didn’t seem to be making it any harder for the thing to move.

“T-Toriko. Head to the back,” I said, gritting my teeth against the pain which grew stronger with the sound of the bells. “A big gun. Get us something big! This isn’t working!”

“Got it! I’ll be right back!” Toriko slapped me on the back, then ran away on shaky legs. Her footsteps faded into the distance.

In my blurring vision, the white square timber and that damn scary woman’s face appeared as a double image. As I stared back into her eyes, unable to flee, I suddenly was struck with uncertainty about something.

Why is she staring at me? She’s been glaring at me the whole time, like we’re having a staring contest or something... even though there are lots of other people.

No... Could it be?

Is she trying to intimidate me? To make me look away? Our attacks won't be able to hit her if we can't recognize her, so to stop my right eye's power from working, she's staring me down with a super scary face...?

The moment I thought that, I was so indignant I surprised myself.

...You're taking me lightly. What are you? Some delinquent from out in the boonies?

Don't think you can scare me into looking away. I'll kill you instead... I'll murder you with this eye!

...Not that I'll be doing the dirty work myself, though!

You would think after staring this long, I would have gotten used to it a little, but for some reason, I wasn't able to adjust to the terror of her face at all. Still, as I stubbornly kept looking, my vision gradually started flickering, and my head started to hurt, too. Kankandara's face warped and twisted, and it was hard to grasp how far away she was. It felt like she was getting further and further away.

Wait, don't run. Stay right there. Toriko's bringing a big gun now. One shot from that, and you're toast...

That was when there was a horn sound, and it was loud enough to blow away the ringing of bells.

The pain withdrew for an instant, and my fading consciousness returned. At some point, one of my knees had touched the ground, and I had been hanging my head. As my head snapped up, with the roar of its engines, and the brilliant flash of its headlights, the Gorgon burst into the open space.

The previously folded arm was raised high, and pointing forward. The end of it carried a nine-bladed plow for ordnance disposal. The horn blared once more, and the soldiers scrambled out of the way. Spewing black exhaust, like the snorting of an enraged bull, the Gorgon charged.

Its massive body, over eight meters high, charged across the open space at an incredible speed. It grazed the offering box in the center, and before my eyes

the bizarrely modified MRAP collided with Kankandara.

The nine plates on the front arm cut deep into the white timber. That didn't kill its momentum, as it kept pushing Kankandara, slamming her into one of the thick trees that made up the rim of the open space.

The sounds of bells as Kankandara thrashed around were wiped out by the roar of the engine and the blaring of the horn. The arm dug in deeper, and the sound of bells rose like a death wail, and then, *snap*, there was an incredible noise as the white timber was broken.

Kankandara's whole body stretched out into a straight line, then suddenly, as if her batteries had died, she ceased to move.

The sound of engines slowly softened, then stopped. The headlights faded out, too. The open space was suddenly dark, and quiet, and the soldiers who had been in agony now rose, groaning, to their feet.

"Sorawo! Are you okay?" Toriko rushed in from outside the open space, and because I had slumped to the ground, she helped me to my feet.

The driver and soldiers got out of the Gorgon. As they looked down at Kankandara's corpse—the remains of that thing—they spoke excitedly amongst themselves in English. *Unbelievable, What a huge snake bitch... Holy shit.*

I had to agree with them on the *unbelievable* part, at least.

Taking Toriko's arm and pulling myself up, I shook my head in disbelief. "I know I told you to get something big..."

"It was the biggest one we had." There was an undisguised sense of pride in Toriko's voice as she responded.

The lieutenant rushed over, and turned a light on us. "Oh! Are you okay?!"

"We're fine... We pulled it off, huh." I tried to give what I thought was a relieved smile, but when they saw me in the light, the lieutenant and Toriko both reeled back in shock.

"Huh? Is something—"

Before I could finish, Toriko reached out with both hands, sandwiching my face between them, and rubbed my face in all directions.

“Bwah, buh, no.”

Finally managing to shake Toriko off, I shouted at her. “Stop it! What’re you doing?!”

I was mad, but Toriko looked relieved.

“You should’ve seen the look on your face, Sorawo. It was just like that woman’s.”

“...Seriously?”

While I was rubbing my face in shock, the other soldiers and vehicles entered the open space. The major got out of the Owlbear and joined us. The lieutenant looked around the space, seemingly mystified. “This is definitely it. The first place we came out of in the Otherside. I wonder why we ever forgot.”

“I’ve heard that when people go through an incredibly traumatic experience, it can sometimes cause memory loss. Perhaps you all saw that monster in the beginning, and scattered in terror.”

What I was saying sounded perfectly reasonable, but all my knowledge of human psychology came from gathering true ghost stories. The lieutenant and major, who didn’t know that, nodded repeatedly.

“We took a lot of casualties because of that,” the lieutenant said, sounding frustrated.

“We’d better get you boys home before anything scarier than this happens.”

I walked to the center of the open space, and stopped in front of the offering box. I pointed at the silver shimmering around the outside of the box, and spoke to Toriko. “Could you grab here?”

Toriko removed her glove, then thrust her translucent fingers through the shimmer. “Here?”

“Around there. Now, keep holding it as you walk.”

When Toriko moved, it looked as if the offering box had been squished. In its place, it looked like a parallelogram had been cut out of space. It was a gate. Beyond it, I could see what looked like a stone patio overgrown with grass, and an empty lot covered in palm leaves at night. Warm, humid air drifted in

through the gate. This was the air of the subtropics, pregnant with the presence of living creatures. The throaty cheering of Marines erupted from behind us. It was Okinawa in the surface world.

“You can go home through here. Please, hurry.”

Turning around and gesturing to their men, the lieutenant and major gave their subordinates the order. *All right, boys! Let’s go home!*

Hurrah! The men shouted in unison.

The tired, dirty faces of the Marines broke into full-faced grins for the first time since we met them. They gave the thumbs-up to me and Toriko who were standing next to the gate, then seeking high fives and fist bumps as they passed by, they vanished into the surface world one after another. I think I heard a lifetime supply of thank yous.

Oh, and *The Girls*, too. Thank you, *The Girls*. It’s all thanks to you, *The Girls*. You get out of here quick, too, *The Girls*...

I had been ignoring it up until now, but what was with the definite article in that nickname? Were we a really plain girls’ band, or something?

Just as my cheeks started to hurt, exhausted from responding with a smile I wasn’t used to, the last soldier went out the gate. That only left the lieutenant and the major.

“This is all thanks to you. We’re truly grateful—”

When the major started thanking me again, I held up a hand to stop him.

“Nah, enough of that. Just get going already. There’s no telling how long we can keep it open, after all. We’ll talk later.”

“Really? Then see you on the other side,” the major said.

“Well, we’ll be going on ahead.” The lieutenant smiled at us, then vanished into the surface world.

As the major was about to go through the gate last, I stopped him and asked a question I had tried to avoid until now. “Can I ask just one thing...? On the way from the camp to here, how many casualties were there?”

The major turned back and looked down at me, solemnly opening his mouth. “...Zero. Your rescue operation was a perfect success. It’s awe-inspiring.”

I was struck with such relief I felt like all the strength had been drained out of my body. The major smiled, took a step forward, and reached out a hand to us through the gate.

“You’re the only ones left. Come on—”

“Uh, sorry. This is as far as we go,” I said.

“Come again?”

“That’s enough, Toriko.” When Toriko released the space she had been holding, the gate closed, and the major’s bewildered face vanished.

Silence returned to the forest. The silhouettes of abandoned military vehicles in the vacant lot rose up like massive boulders in the darkness.

I had discussed our plan to split off from the American forces in the chaos of the escape with Toriko in advance. No matter how friendly they were, and how indebted they might feel, any further involvement would bring more trouble than anything.

“He said no one died. Are we awesome, or what?”

“Yeah. I’m glad...” Toriko whispered in relief. “Because those people have families waiting for them to come home, too, you know? I really am glad.”

“True that. Good work, Toriko.”

“You, too, Sorawo... Whoa, are you okay?”

My legs got shaky, and then I collapsed right there. Toriko rushed to support me.

“Whew... That was exhausting,” I said, meaning it from the bottom of my heart. “It was a whole lot of trouble, but somehow we got everyone... home...”

I stumbled over the words I had tried to continue with half a smile, and my vision blurred in a way I hadn’t expected.

Oh! That’s not good, I thought, but it was already too late. The tears overflowed, running down my tense face.

“Whoa, hold on, hold on, I’m sorry.”

Seeing me go into a panic, Toriko gave me a hug. I hugged her back. Or, more like I clung to her. Toriko was as sweaty as I was, but she smelled so amazingly good.

“You were really giving it your all, huh, Sorawo,” Toriko said gently, stroking my head.

Stop it... If you do that, you’re only going to make me cry more. “I mean, you said you wanted to save all those guys, so I...” I said through my sobs.

Toriko’s arms tightened around me. “You listened to my selfish request.”

“I mean, it was no big deal. I just wanted a new gun.”

Toriko laughed a little. “Even though you didn’t shoot your new gun so much as once?”

I shook my head with my face still pressed into her chest, continuing to make excuses for myself.

“The truth is, I honestly didn’t care. I had forgotten about those guys until you brought them up again. I mean, I’m a heartless girl who never thinks of anyone but herself, right?”

As I slowly forced those words out through my sobs, Toriko shook her head.

“That’s not true at all. You’re a real good girl, Sorawo. You’re kind.”

“As kind as Kozakura-san?”

When I asked that in a quiet voice, Toriko went silent for a moment. “...That line bothered you?” she asked.

“...!” My face suddenly got hot. I very quickly started to feel embarrassed about hugging her, and I tore myself loose.

“I’m sorry, I lost my composure there, and—” When I tried to apologize, Toriko reached out, and started rubbing my face.

“Sto... Stop that! What are you doing?!”

I batted her hands away, then glared at Toriko. She grinned happily. “I like seeing you try your hardest. You know that, Sorawo?”

“...Why?”

“Because even when it comes to things I couldn’t ever hope to do alone, I feel like I can do them if I’m with you.”

When she said that so easily, I was at a loss for words. The tears that had almost subsided felt like they were going to start pouring again.

That’s my line, Toriko.

I tried to say it, but suddenly, something tugged at the back of my mind.

Huh? I feel like I heard the same thing not that long ago...

Narrowing my eyebrows, I asked, “...Is that why you always order more than you can eat, too? Because even if you can’t finish it yourself, I’ll do my best to help?”

“Oh...! Uh, that could be it,” Toriko said, her eyes wandering.

Oh, you...

It all started to feel stupid, and I let out a sigh.

“Let’s just... go home already.”

“Yeah. Let’s go. Where are we going back from?”

“We didn’t really think through the return trip, huh. Worst-case scenario, we can use this gate here, but we’d run right into the U.S. forces, so...”

“That’d be super awkward, yeah.”

“Well, let’s look around a bit.”

We passed by Kankandara’s remains, and walked deeper into the forest.

“Hey, what do you want to eat at the after-party?” Toriko asked.

“Didn’t we have one of those just yesterday?”

“That was for last time. Besides, it wasn’t an after-party, it was a meeting for review and reflection, remember?”

“Fine, whatever... but I don’t have much money left. When we get back, I need Kozakura-san to buy that hat off me.”

We walked along, searching through the dark woods for a gate, engaging in idle banter as we went.

Jumping straight to the conclusion, we got home safe.

Before we could be attacked by the monsters of the other world's night, we found another gate in the forest not far away, and secretly returned to the surface world without encountering Palehorse Battalion again.

Still, at this point, I never would have anticipated I would be enjoying the sunny beaches of an Okinawan resort together with Toriko.

File 6: Resort Night at the Beach of the End

1

By the time I woke up, the sun was high in the sky, and the white sunlight shining in through the gap in the curtains was blindingly bright.

I had a dull headache. My body was drenched with sweat. What time did I go to sleep yesterday?

“Ungh... Ahh.”

With zombie-like groans, I sat up in bed. Rubbing my sleep-addled eyes, I grabbed the curtains like I always did, and opened them without another thought. Suddenly, the pleasant air that had been maintained by air conditioning and a cool breeze until moments ago was blasted away by the violent summer light.

In bed next to me, Toriko screamed and buried her face in a pillow. “Why would you do thaaaat?!”

Unable to answer her muffled protest, I looked down at Toriko, dumbfounded. She was lying on her side, curled into a ball under the thin blanket and hugging the pillow tight to block out the sun, so I could only see the golden hair on the top of her head glittering in the sunlight.

...Why is Toriko sleeping next to me?

I looked down at my own body. I was wearing a T-shirt I didn't recognize. As my mind, which had been dulled by sleep, gradually awakened, more and more questions emerged.

What is this place? It's a stylish wooden... cottage? Bungalow? What am I doing here?

Also, why is it so bright? The sunlight's so intense it made my vision white out. Why, it's almost like I'm in the tropics...

...Oh.

It was gradually coming back to me.

I squinted, looking around outside the window again. The sky was high, and perfectly blue. It made a clear contrast with the bright white of the sunlight reflecting off the buildings.

That's right. We were currently in Okinawa—in Naha. This was the pension where I had drunk a whole lot of Orion Beer and just a little *awamori* before passing out last night.

Calling it a pension made it sound like some kind of resort, but this place was smack-dab in the middle of the city. It was a wooden penthouse on top of a three-story building, and right outside our window, across a street lined with palm trees, was a big billboard for a consumer finance company.

“What time is it?” Toriko asked, still holding the pillow. I looked at the clock on the headboard and answered.

“Just past ten.”

“Nngh... When's checkout...?”

“I don't know.”

I mean, I didn't even remember checking in.

I looked down at the floor as I stretched, and the glossy flooring was littered with our discarded clothes. Had I been sleeping in a state that let me keep my human dignity because I'd retained some degree of reason, or had I simply passed out in the middle of stripping...?

I wanted water. I wanted a shower.

Getting out of bed, I felt the coldness of the floor with my bare feet as I headed towards the door. Then, I noticed a western-style toilet was installed in the room.

“Huh?” No matter how I looked at it, it was a toilet. With a washlet, too. It was only separated from the bedroom by a waist-high screen.

Could it be that this place we thought was a pension was, in fact, some sort of

stylish police holding cell? In my bewilderment I opened the door, and there was a kitchen and living room. On the other side of the door to the living room, there was a sink, a shower, and another toilet separate from the one in the bedroom, so that was a relief.

When I used the toilet and then looked at myself in the mirror above the sink, a version of myself with bedhead stared back. The T-shirt had “Shimanchu,” meaning islander, written on it in thick brush strokes.

I returned to the living room in a bit of a daze, and there I spotted two vinyl bags from Donki that had been tossed on the sofa. While going over their contents, more of my memories from last night started coming back to me...

Toriko and I had headed off to save the U.S. forces stranded at Kisaragi Station, and managed to escort tens of survivors back to where they had come from—a training ground for the U.S. forces in Okinawa.

Once we had seen off the group that called themselves Palehorse Battalion, we found another gate not far away, and used it to return to the surface world. That was yesterday.

The gate we had found led to the roof of a building looking on to Kokusai-doori, or International Street, a busy street in Naha frequented by tourists.

While we were happy to have come out in a convenient location, we stowed all our equipment for the expedition, especially the guns, in our bags, and the first thing we did when we got down to ground level was have an after-party.

Between the release from intense stress, and the elation at suddenly being thrown to Okinawa, we were pretty pumped. First we went to a place with private rooms where we could get some Okinawan cuisine. Toriko over-ordered, like always, and the staff worried whether we would be able to finish it all, but we polished off the peanut tofu, Okinawan herbal tempura, sea grapes, rafute pork, butter-fried ocean sunfish, papaya chanpuru, goat sashimi, and bitter melon fried rice as soon as they came out. We ordered several rounds of drinks, and ultimately ended up drinking for around two hours. From there we headed for the coast, and we started talking about doing a pub crawl.

I'd had a lot of firsts with Toriko, and this was my first pub crawl, too. We

went into the shopping arcade from Kokusai-doori, turning several times without knowing where we were going, then found a bar on a hill road, and ordered some cocktails... right? After a few more drinks, we talked about whether it was really possible to slide a glass of whiskey down the counter and say, "This one's on me," and we decided we should totally try it, but I'd like to believe we never actually acted on that.

...That was a lot more than Orion Beer, and a little awamori.

Well, anyway, we left that bar, had some Okinawan soba in a nearby restaurant, and because we were having such a good time, we decided to look for a place to stay the night. We were all sweaty, so we hit up Donki for a change of clothes, did some alcohol-driven impulse buys of food and drink, caught a cab, and checked in at the inn we randomly chose and reserved online.

This was the result.

Picking up a fully melted ice pop which sloshed around inside its packaging, I let out a sigh. The other food here included some fish sausages, which I can only assume we had intended to snack on while drinking. Maybe this spam onigiri and taco sushi roll were supposed to be some carbs to finish things up. As for drinks, we had two untouched cans of beer, and two cans of chuhai marked as being exclusive to Okinawa. There was a bottle of oolong tea, too. Just how much were we planning to drink? I could understand getting instant coffee, but did we need a whole jar of the stuff while on vacation? It said there was enough for 45 cups in this thing.

The other bag was packed with new socks, underwear, and T-shirts. I'm sure we just bought whatever as a change of clothes while we were drunk, but we'd bought too much, and the bag was packed full. I'd have to go over what was in it later.

I figured, for now, I'd have a cup of coffee, so I poured water into the electric kettle, and turned it on. While I was doing that, I found my smartphone plugged into the kitchen outlet, so I retrieved it. Even in my drunken state, I hadn't forgotten to charge it. Good job, me.

Looking through my history, there was a call with Kozakura at a little past nine o'clock the night before. I must have reported that we made it back from the

other world. After that, Toriko and I had spent upwards of four hours periodically tormenting her with pictures of Okinawan cuisine and alcohol. The messages were all marked as read, and the only response was a stamp with an adorable animal with a pulsing vein in its forehead to express anger.

Alcohol is scary... While I was feeling that keenly, the water came to a boil. I found a mug in the kitchen, opened the jar of Nescafé Gold Blend, and made some coffee.

I opened the door to the bedroom, and right in front of me was the toilet behind a wooden screen. Yeah, that was really weird. Though, maybe it was that my preconceptions were wrong, and this was not in fact a bedroom with a toilet, but a toilet with a bed.

Leaving the two cups and their fragrant aroma on the side table, I gave Toriko a shake.

“Toriko, I brought coffee.”

“I want coffee...”

“Which is why I brought it.”

It was funny hearing her spout sleep-addled nonsense.

“Come on, just wake up already. It’s already half past ten.”

I put my hand on the thin blanket, then pulled it away immediately.

“Uwah?!”

I hurriedly returned it to where it had been. Toriko mumbled an objection, and pulled the blanket close to her.

Wh-Why is this woman sleeping in the nude?!

As I stumbled backwards, my foot touched some of the clothes scattered across the floor. Looking down, there were, indeed, panties mixed in with them. *Whoa, hold on. Give me a second here. Did this mean I’d spent the whole night sleeping next to Toriko when she was bare naked? Whaaa....?*

For me, who had no friends in middle or high school, and had barely even touched another person, the sudden shocking revelation I had been sharing a

bed with my naked friend was too much for me.

Unable to tear my eyes away from the lump on the bed which rose and fell with each breath she took, I stood there unable to act.

What was I supposed to think about this?

No, maybe I didn't have to worry about it. It could be that most people slept in the buff, and I just never knew. This might not be anything to fuss about. I mean, I was starting to feel like it would be rude to bring up what state another person slept in anyway. Yeah, that was it. Besides, even when we wore clothes, humans were all naked underneath them anyway...

"Achoo!"

Just as I was getting lost in my own thoughts, Toriko sneezed and started sniffing. She hugged the pillow tighter. "I'm cold."

...Put some clothes on!

"Here, the coffee's hot, so be careful," I said.

"Mmm."

"It says checkout's at twelve."

"Mmm."

Toriko got dressed and sat across the living room table from me, but she was probably still out of it, because I couldn't get a proper response to anything I said.

"Do... Do you always sleep naked?"

"Mmm. When I'm in the mood."

What did that mean? Did she go, *Today feels like a pajama day, or, I'm feeling open-minded today*, or something? I couldn't understand it at all.

"For breakfast, there's an onigiri or a sushi roll. Which one do you want, Toriko?"

"Both."

"Whaaa? Okay, we're splitting both then."

I opened the package for the spam onigiri, split it, and handed her half. Toriko took it and started munching. Her eyelids were still half-closed.

Toriko's T-shirt was a deep blue, with a super-deformed flying fish drawn on it in white. It was just plain cute. Looking down at my islander T-shirt, I couldn't understand it. Why did I choose something an over-excited tourist would have...?

...Though, that's exactly what I was last night. I didn't remember it all that well, but I wanted to pray that I didn't get up to any shenanigans.

"Hey... Wasn't there something strange about the room?" Oh, it seemed Toriko had begun to regain the capacity for speech.

"What do you mean, something?"

"The toilet..."

"Ohh. Apparently that's the style in New York."

When I pulled up this place's website on my smartphone to verify what our checkout time was, that's what it said there.

"The interior designer told them the current trend in New York is to combine the bedroom and bathroom, and that's what they ended up with as a result."

When she heard my explanation, Toriko frowned. "Someone must have been taking them for a ride, don't you think?"

"I agree."

"Even if we concede that's what's in style, the bath is nowhere to be seen. I don't get it... Why just the toilet?"

Toriko shut her eyes tight, perhaps trying to get her still sleepy brain to boot up, and kept furrowing her brow.

"Hmm, maybe it's so if a New York celebrity is partying, even if they get totally wasted and need to lie down, when they feel sick, the toilet's right there to throw up in, or something..."

"Huh? You think that's why?"

"Or when they do cocaine, if they start feeling sick, they can throw up in it..."

“Hey, Toriko, you feeling sick? Are you going to throw up?”

“I’m fine... just a bit out of it. I think a shower’ll get me thinking clearly again.”

“Okay then.” I didn’t know if this was the style in New York or not, but I wished they wouldn’t do misleading things like this. Whenever I suddenly ran into something that seemed out of place in the middle of normal life, I worried it was a warning I was entering the other world.

We polished off the onigiri and sushi roll, then sipped our coffee. I was looking at the shape of the mug distorted through Toriko’s translucent left hand.

“Toriko, if you want to take a shower, hurry up and do it. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“Right.”

“Oh, what should we do about the alcohol, or this bottle? We can’t just leave them here, huh. It feels stupid lugging all this weight to the airport, but we can’t drink it all now, so—”

“What do you mean, the airport?”

“Huh? Naha Airport.”

“Why’re we going to the airport?”

“Huh? To get home, of course. You realize it’s already Monday, right? I’ve given up on making it to my classes today, but I need to go to the university tomorrow.”

“Even though we already made the trip to Okinawa?” Toriko sounded dissatisfied, so I turned a suspicious eye on her.

“So what if we did come here?”

“Sorawo, did you forget what we promised yesterday?”

I had no clue what she was talking about. Noticing my confusion, Toriko pursed her lips. “We said we’d go to the sea, didn’t we?”

“...The sea?” I parroted back at her.

“That’s right! We got so excited about Okinawa’s beaches, we even bought

swimsuits!”

I don’t know what happened to her earlier drowsiness, but Toriko’s eyes were sparkling now.

“The blue sea, the white sand! The weather’s so perfect, we absolutely must go! We’re visiting a summer resort together, Sorawo!”

I stared vacantly at Toriko, who had returned to her usual level of excitement in no time.

We bought swimsuits? Together?

Me, going to the sea. Swimsuits.

A beach... r-resort...

“Seriously...?”

2

Yes, she was serious.

The Donki bag, which I had thought only contained a change of clothes, contained a swimsuit, towel, sunscreen... basically everything needed to go have fun on the beach.

Just how bad did we want to go to the beach last night?

Once Toriko got back on her usual groove, she moved fast. She took a quick shower, came out in nothing but a T-shirt and panties, said, “Leave the packing to me,” and shoved me into the bathroom in her place.

In the shower, I tried to prepare myself emotionally. I hadn’t worn a swimsuit since the pool in primary school. What was the sea like again? I didn’t remember. I knew I’d seen photos from when Mom was still alive that suggested she had taken me to swim in the sea somewhere. But I was really little, like one or two at the time, so I hardly remembered it at all. Dad was sane back then, too, so the three of us all looked so happy in that picture. I wondered if that picture was still sitting there, in our empty family home.

A swimsuit, huh... Even the thought of it intimidated me. I still hadn’t seen

exactly what kind of swimsuit I'd bought yesterday, but what was I going to do? I was guaranteed to look weird. I mean, I didn't know anything but my school swimsuit. I couldn't imagine I'd managed to choose anything halfway decent while drunk.

I was already hesitant enough about going somewhere as sunny as the beaches of Okinawa in summer. I didn't hate going outdoors, but that was only if I was going somewhere with no other people. I didn't want to go to a crowded beach...

What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do? I agonized over it as the hot water lashed at me, until I heard Toriko's voice from outside the bathroom.

"Sorawo, you okay? There's only fifteen minutes to go!"

"Wha?! No way! I'll be right out."

"Okay, I'll get your change of clothes ready."

I hurriedly turned off the shower and rushed out. With no time to dry my hair, I just wiped it off quickly and returned to the living room.

The new T-shirt that came out of the Donki bag had a goat in a pot on it. Cute. I wore the T-shirt on top of a camisole, with my usual jeans underneath, and flower-print sandals on my feet. On my head, I wore a gray newsboy hat with the brim low over my eyes. The color contact was buried somewhere in my bags, so my blue right eye was exposed. Toriko wore a one-piece dress with long, laced, UV protection gloves, deep blue leather sandals, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and sunglasses, the perfect summer outfit.

I looked at the images of us reflected in the mirror with exasperation. "We're totally dressed for fun!" I cried in disbelief.

"You were so into it when we talked about going to the seaside last night, Sorawo," Toriko said with a smirk. *No, no, she's lying. I refuse to believe it.*

Toriko had more or less sorted all our luggage, so we just barely managed to check out in time. Though, maybe there was no need to hurry. Once we went down to the ground floor of the building where our pension was located, we put the key in a basket left out on the front desk, and that was all we had to do to check out.

The moment we left the air-conditioned building, the air was hot and humid, and the southern sun beat down on us relentlessly. If we basked in it too long, we would no doubt crumble to ash. For someone like me who was born in Akita, where we didn't get much sunlight, the July sun in Okinawa was a dangerous weapon.

"Wow, this is really something, huh. You'll burn in no time." Toriko narrowed her eyes beneath the brim of her hat. We were some distance from the center of Naha, so no matter where we planned to go, we were going to need a car.

Along the straight road, there were buildings here and there which had their outer walls damaged by exposure to the sea breeze. The sun shining from straight above made it seem as though the town had lost all its shadows. Looking both ways down the street, I didn't see many people. When I thought about it, not many people would actively choose to walk around during the hottest time of day.

"Let's flag down a cab. If we keep walking like this, we're going to dry up," I said.

As we watched darkly-tanned men on bicycles, scooters, and cars with Okinawan plates pass us by, we were acutely aware that we were losing our hydration. Fortunately for us, a taxi stopped before we turned into two overenthusiastic tourists, dried up and stuck to the pavement.

I don't think the large, plain backpack that contained all our equipment really went with our current attire, but the middle-aged driver didn't give it any special attention.

"We wanted to go to the beach. Any place you'd suggest?" Toriko asked without hesitation. She said she was shy, but when I saw her in situations like this, she sure didn't seem it. I wonder if the reason she was so curt with Palehorse Battalion was because she'd been tense at the time.

"Oh, sure. Would you like a place that's popular?"

"Ah! I'd prefer somewhere without people," I interjected despite myself. "No one around, quiet, but still a good spot..."

"In that case, I'll take you to Nezokobama in Nadabaru. There's no one there."

“Sure, let’s go with that.” I didn’t know either of those proper nouns, but I nodded anyway.

“Yeah, I like quiet places, too.” I had expected her to object, but it seemed Toriko agreed with me.

“Oh, but it’d be inconvenient if there were no stores there. Maybe we ought to buy something on the way?”

“You said it. Excuse me, do you think we could swing by a convenience store, if there is one?”

The taxi started to move, and we were finally able to relax in our seats. We left the road lined with used car lots and family restaurants, and got onto a major road with more traffic. A fence belonging to the American military base continued along the side of the road.

I wonder what happened to the guys from Palehorse Battalion. I pray they never wander into the other world again... And that, no matter what, we never run into them in the surface world...

While I was thinking that, the fence ended, and the sea came into view.

“Wow!” Toriko exclaimed. I couldn’t help but lean in, too.

The emerald green sea, which seemed to deepen further from shore, was so beautiful it even entranced me, who was less than enthusiastic about all this beach and resort stuff.

“This’ll be fun. I haven’t been to the sea at all since coming back to Japan,” Toriko said gleefully.

“Did you go often when you were overseas?”

“My parents would take me in the summer. Back when we lived in Vancouver, we did stuff like participate in the parade at Sunset Beach. It was fun.”

It was like she lived in a whole other world from me.

“Oh, yeah. I only know the Sea of Japan.”

“Does the Sea of Japan not have anywhere to swim?”

“It does, but...”

“Let’s go there next, then. Would you show me around?”

“I... wouldn’t mind.” I found myself at a loss for words. There were the bad memories involving my family, but compared to the Okinawan sea before our eyes right now, I also couldn’t deny the Sea of Japan lacked color.

“...Oh, right. Don’t forget your sunscreen. Toriko, you’ve got fairer skin than me, so if you let your guard down, you’re in for a rough time.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, that’s right! I turn all red.”

I put on sunscreen myself when Toriko was done, then had the taxi stop at a nearby convenience store. We bought a collapsible cooler, water, drinks, and food, then had the taxi take off again.

Inside the air-conditioned vehicle, my mind started getting hazy. The driver was quiet, and the radio kept playing some sort of traditional folk song, or children’s song, or something.

Oh, the blue moonlit seashore

Nachutui who searches for Aya

Is born from the land of waves

With wet wings of silver

Oh, the sadness of Nachutui

Crossing the sea in search of Aya

Vanishing into the land of moonlight

One thousand shorebirds with silver wings...

Toriko was leaning her head against the window, her eyes closed. Was she asleep, maybe? Her light, pink lips, as young and fresh as a small child’s, were slightly parted. As I looked at her defenseless face in profile, I noticed at some point the car had entered a residential district. From the crimson roofs and the cobblestones, stone shisas watched us with wide eyes.

Suddenly, I noticed a shuffling sound from the navigator’s seat. I took a peek,

and there was a small spiral shell there.

On closer inspection, there were legs and pincers sticking out... It was a hermit crab.

There was sand piled around the hermit crab, like a little garden built on top of the seat. The strong sunlight shining through the front windshield made the white sand shine like silver.

As I watched it flash and shimmer, my mind grew hazier and hazier.

I sank into the seat, my consciousness fading away...

3

“Hey, Sorawo, wake up.”

I woke to my shoulder being shaken.

“S-Sorry, I was out cold.” Flustered, I sat up, rubbing my eyes, and asked Toriko, “Are we there? How much is the fare?”

“I dunno... I mean, the driver’s gone.”

“Whuh?”

Looking around, I finally realized how abnormal our situation was.

“The heck is this?!”

I had been dozing off in a wreck. The seat under me was falling apart, the four doors were all missing, and there was no trace of any of the glass. The driver’s seat was occupied by a tree which had grown through the floor, and had spread its leaves. The navigator’s seat had a pile of sand on it that looked like it had burst out of the dashboard. There were traces of some small living creature having crawled across it. Was that the hermit crab I had seen before drifting off?

“It was like this when I woke up. I have no idea what’s going on...” Toriko said in bewilderment.

Hesitantly, I looked outside. The body of the car, with its paint stripped back

and showing rust underneath, was wrapped in vines from plants growing out of the ground. Under the flat tires was a cluster of bindweed. It formed a carpet of green that covered the entire area, with pink flowers blooming on top of it.

The gentle slope covered in bindweed had white sand at the bottom of it, and beyond it was a sea that shone like turquoise. The sky stretched high above the horizon, and clouds reflected the color of the sea. Far off the coast, there was a massive rock lying on its side that was so big it might have been mistaken for a wall.

In the middle of an incredible silence, all we could hear was the sound of the waves and the wind. Breaking the tranquility, Toriko asked, “Is this the other world?”

“Probably...”

“See anything that looks dangerous?”

I looked around with my right eye. Nothing shone silver. “Looks like we’re safe for the moment, at least.”

“Okay, in that case...” Toriko walked forward resolutely.

“Whoa, whoa, what are you gonna do?”

“Let’s go check it out. Whether this is the surface or the other side, we’ve made it to the beach.”

“Isn’t that being overly optimistic...?”

“Well, hey, it’s the sea!” Toriko said, pouting. “We came to play around together. I’m not going to let it be ruined like this... It’s safe, right? Let’s go. We’ve got guns if we need them.”

“B-But...”

When I acted hesitant, Toriko spoke up impatiently. “Hey, we came all the way to the sea, right? We can’t let ourselves get spooked so easily.”

“S-Sure.”

No, are you serious? I get that you really want to play around, but here?
Ignoring my hesitance, Toriko started walking on her own.

I guess that didn't leave me with much choice. I reshouldered my bags and chased after Toriko.

When we got down to the beach, I could feel the hot sand touching my feet through the sides of my sandals. I didn't see any glitches or monsters. For now, it looked like any ordinary beach. However, as far as I could see, there wasn't a soul around.

The sandy beach continued to the left and right. On the far right there was a breakwater, tetrapods, and a little lighthouse. On the left side, the sand ended where it hit another breakwater. There were a number of buildings up the slope. Was that wooden two-story building a beach house or something?

"Think there's somewhere to change?" Toriko asked, looking around the area.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? We're going to put on swimsuits, right? I'm not big on the idea of changing here, where there's absolutely nothing."

"Y-Yeah."

It seemed Toriko had her mind made up.

"Okay," I said. "Let's take a look at that building. There might be a changing room." I pointed to the top of the slope, and Toriko nodded.

We climbed the slope, leaving tracks in the sandy beach as we went. Climbing a half-buried set of stone stairs, we came out onto a paved road. Here and there, there were the remains of abandoned cars and stalls. The building we had our eye on was a beach house, like I had suspected. On the other side of the front room, which had a dirt floor and was open to the street, there were a number of tatami rooms with low tables. The sign on top of the roof was discolored, and I couldn't make out what it said.

We walked under the eaves, and took a peek inside. It was a total ruin. The menu on the wall was in that strange script peculiar to the other world, and that made me kind of sad. There should have been lots of fun words like "yakisoba" and "snow cones" written there, but I couldn't read any of it. There was no one around, staff or otherwise, and the iron grill they would have made yakisoba on was covered in sand that had blown in, while the crushed ice

machine was lying on the floor in pieces.

Toriko searched through our bags and retrieved the flashlight and her Makarov. She inserted a magazine, pulled the slide, and checked that the bullet had been chambered.

“What are you gonna do?”

“I’ll go clear the place,” Toriko said.

“W-Wait. I’ll go with you.” I dug my own Makarov out of the backpack and skipped out on using the holster. Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I held on to the grip.

“Sorry for the hold up. I’m good to go.”

Toriko nodded.

“I’ll look ahead, so you watch our backs, Sorawo.”

“Okay.”

Leaving our bags out under the eaves, we passed through the main room of the beach house. It got darker as we went in deeper, so Toriko flicked on the flashlight.

Holding the flashlight backhanded, next to her face, it cast a cone of light which illuminated a case of beer lying on its side and a stack of chairs in the darkness. The windows lining the hall were all papered over from the inside with yellowed newspaper. It was, of course, all illegible.

Toriko lowered her voice. “Let’s open all the windows. I’ll keep watch, so could you do it?”

“Gotcha. Be careful of the floor, okay? We’re in sandals, so we’d better be sure not to step on any nails or glass.”

“Okay.”

I tore down the deteriorating newspapers. Once the glass windows were opened and the shutters to the outside were too, light and wind blew away the stagnant air in the building. There was a kitchen, toilet, and a break room for employees. Having finished checking the front rooms, we went down the short

hall that led to a series of large tatami rooms. This section was built like a boarding house, with large baths and sinks, and the cupboards in the kitchen that all held a large number of the same kind of plate. In the laundry room, where many washers and dryers were lined up, there was a dusty pile of linens.

By the time we reached the back door, opening every window as we went, the first floor was so bright it was unrecognizable. The torn newsprint on the floor made rustling sounds as it was blown around by the wind.

Toriko breathed a sigh of relief, then lowered the flashlight. "That's the first floor clear. I'd like to look at the second floor, too, but..."

We both looked up to the ceiling.

"There's no sound, yeah," I said.

"The place is a ruin..."

We had found a staircase leading to the second floor on the way through, but there were dining trays laid on each step, and it wouldn't be easy to go past them. Taking a quick peek, the trays carried used plates and bowls, and there was dried rice stuck to them.

"Well... I guess it's fine. This place seems safe. Let's go play."

"Okaaaay...?"

Toriko, who seemed to have gotten tired of this, went right out the back door. I followed. The back of the building was a gloomy forest, and it seemed unwise to set foot inside it now. We circled around the outside of the building back to the front. There, I found shower stalls with curtains, and I came to a stop.

"Hey, couldn't we have gotten changed here?"

"Oh, nice idea." Toriko said that so easily, I felt deflated.

"All that time we spent clearing the building was wasted!"

"Better safe than sorry. It wasn't a waste."

This, after she blew off checking the second floor...

Toriko pulled another paper bag out of the Donki bag, tossing it over to me. "Here's yours, Sorawo."

“Oh! Okay...”

“What’s wrong? You look uneasy.”

“Uhh, yeah... I haven’t worn a swimsuit in front of anyone since I was in primary school. It’s embarrassing, to be honest. I’m worried I’ll look weird,” I confessed. Toriko smiled.

“You’ll be fine. I mean, I’ll be wearing one, too.”

“You’re fine because you have a great figure.” The moment I said that, I had a flashback to the glimpse I had gotten of Toriko as she was sleeping this morning, and I got flustered.

While I was scratching my cheek and trying to regain my senses, Toriko looked at me with worry. “Um, do you have big scars, or tattoos, or something you’d rather not let me see? If so, I’m sorry for not being more considerate...”

“Huh? Oh, no, no, it’s nothing like that.”

“Well, okay then. But even if it was, I wouldn’t let it bother me, whatever your skin looks like, Sorawo.”

“...Sure.”

How could this girl say a thing like that so easily?

“Okay? So let’s get changed, and go.”

At Toriko’s urging, I nodded my head.

4

Hmm. Oh, I see.

Looking at my swimsuit, it made an odd amount of sense to me.

Why was that...? It was a parka. I was wearing a striped bikini top and shorts, with a rash guard parka over top. If I closed up the front of it, I didn’t look all that different from usual. It was just that trading the jeans for shorts meant you could see my bare legs.

It's very me, I thought. I hated myself a little for the fact that, even when thoroughly sloshed, I still couldn't be very bold.

I checked myself in the mirror of the shower stall. After considering it for a while, I decided to leave the parka open.

When I left the stall, Toriko was just coming out of the one next to me.

She wore a black bikini, and a flower-pattern cardigan. Her mature and elegant sexiness was softened by the cute feeling of her sunglasses and straw hat. Her basic appearance was solid, too, so she looked crazy good. I was just thin and muscular, but with Toriko's tight muscles she still maintained a soft roundness, too. She could easily have made it as a fashion model.

While I was staring at her, Toriko looked at me and smiled. "Looking good, Sorawo. That's cute."

"Huh? Uh, you think so?"

I had been disappointed with myself until just moments ago, but the moment Toriko paid me a compliment, I got all giddy. I cleared my throat to hide the way my voice had gotten shrill with excitement. "Y-You look good, too... You're pretty..."

I thought I'd go for a simple compliment, but I trailed off, and my voice turned into a whisper. Toriko smiled and was about to say something, but she suddenly covered her mouth with the back of her hand and looked away. Looking at her face in profile, she'd turned red.

"Thanks..."

Was she feeling shy? Toriko avoided making eye contact with me, even through her sunglasses.

"Th-The beach house! Yeah, can we go back to the beach house one more time? There's some things I want to bring along."

The way that Toriko got all flustered over my compliments, even when she had to be well aware that she was pretty and that her outfit looked good on her, was a little funny.

It turned out what Toriko wanted to bring along was a beach parasol that had

been abandoned in a corner of the beach house, as well as some white, plastic deck chairs.

“I found these while we were clearing the building. Nice, huh?” Toriko had gotten back into her usual groove, and she sounded proud of herself when she said that. On closer inspection, despite some sand and dust, they still looked usable.

“Okay, fair enough, I’m sure we’ll want these sorts of things out on the beach.”

“I know, right?”

“But how do you plan to bring them?”

“Work hard at it together?”

We were both hauling heavy bags of our own, along with a cooler, and the Donki bag with our change of clothes in it. Yet still, we ended up dragging a parasol and two deck chairs behind us down the beach, too.

“Hahh, hahh... Do you think here is good?”

Toriko came to a stop about ten meters from the water’s edge.

“It’s good enough. Geez.”

“Okay. Let’s set up the parasol, then.”

We put down our heavy luggage there and began setting up camp. Thrusting the parasol as firmly into the sand as we could, we then placed our backpacks at the base of it for support. Unfolding the two deck chairs and laying them out beneath the parasol, we then put a sheet and the cooler down between them. The Makarovs went on top of the sheet, too.

We opened up a package of wet wipes we had gotten at the convenience store and wiped the dust off the deck chairs.

“Okay. That about does it, I guess.”

“It’s perfect!” Toriko declared, laying down on one of the deck chairs. “You, too, Sorawo. Hurry, hurry.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I stretched on the chair next to her, and I felt the tension draining away.

In my field of vision I could see my and Toriko's legs, and beyond them the southern seas spread out. That bluish green color was indescribably beautiful.

The waves which came in, and went back out. The scent of the sea breeze. This really was the perfect summer resort.

...If you ignored the perfectly bizarre environment we were in, that is.

"What do you figure that is?" Toriko asked listlessly.

"Who knows...? Alcatraz Penitentiary, maybe?"

"That's an awfully big penitentiary, huh."

We were looking at a great gray structure floating off in the distance. It had to be hundreds of meters across. It was simple, like a shopping mall made all of concrete, and consisted of several floors. I could see several long ramps and what looked like spiral staircases, but couldn't see anyone traversing them. The reason I had been able to be instantly certain we'd entered the other world was because as soon as we exited the ruined car, we had spotted this bizarre construction.

"Hey, Toriko, think we should get out the rifles?"

"Hmm... Yeah. Just to be safe."

"Yeah, safe."

I got up, then pulled the bundle containing my disassembled assault rifle out of my backpack. I sat down on my deck chair and watched Toriko as she quickly assembled it.

"Sorry to make you do this all the time."

"You should learn, too, Sorawo. I'll get you able to disassemble and clean it in the dark."

"I don't need to be able to do that much."

She put a magazine of 5.56 rounds in place, then pushed in the bolt release lever. I'd learned that much, so I could do it myself, too. Now that the M4 CQBR was ready to shoot at any time, she engaged the safety, and stood it up next to

the parasol. Toriko then prepared her own AK-101, before returning to lie down on her deck chair again.

“Okay, and we’re good.”

“Want something to drink?”

“Oh, yeah! Let’s have a toast.”

I opened the cooler and extracted two cans of Orion Beer. They fizzed as we opened them with the pull tap, then we knocked our cans together.

“Yay!”

“Cheers!”

To what?

Well, not like it matters, I guess.

If I just ignored that this was the other world, the beer tasted good, the sea breeze felt refreshing, and Toriko and I had this pretty beach to ourselves. Was this not perfection?

“Ahh, the beer you drink while skipping class at a beach in Okinawa tastes super great. I may be done for.”

“You may well be.”

“I was planning to just take a plane back, like normal, but now that I think about it, what was I planning to do with the guns?” I asked.

“When we were drinking last night, we talked about taking them apart, and sending them home by mail or courier.”

“Whah? That’d never work. They have to take a plane from Okinawa, I’m sure they’d get X-rayed. Even if we were splitting up the parts, we’d have to do it really well. I mean, one look at the shape of the bullets would be a dead giveaway...”

Even as I said this, I was surprised how antisocial this conversation we were having was.

“Ahaha, you figure? Talking things over when we’re both drunk didn’t help much, huh.”

“I’m just glad we didn’t act on it... It’s a bit of a shame, but I guess we’ll have to ditch them.”

“That, or we go back through the other world.”

“Whaa... From here?”

I twisted my head around to look behind me. I didn’t think I wanted to set foot in the gloomy woods behind the beach house, and who knew where the path along the seaside went.

“I don’t think that’s happening... It’d be good if this was connected to the terrain of the other world that we know, though.”

“We’d want to get a look from up high, yeah.”

“Hmm, that lighthouse is about our only option for that, right? But it doesn’t look all that tall...”

Having slowly sipped at her first can of Orion Beer until it was empty, Toriko sat up in her deck chair. “Want to go check out the shore?”

“Sure.”

We left the shadow of the parasol, and approached the sea, bringing the Makarovs with us—just in case.

The water was clear, and we could see the sands of a wide shallow beach. We found shells lying on the sandy beach and tried throwing them into the sea. There was no hissing and smoke, so I carefully tried dipping the bottom of my sandal into the water.

“Seems fine.”

“Score.”

Toriko took her sandals off, and stepped barefoot into the water.

I had been focusing my consciousness into my right eye, in preparation for if something attacked us, but I didn’t spot any especially suspicious movement. I followed Toriko into the sea. The waves washed against my ankles. The cold water felt good.

I walked over to Toriko, who was in up to her thighs. Toriko had her eyes fixed

in the direction the waves were coming from, towards the horizon. “How far do you think this sea goes?”

“All the way to Niraikanai, maybe?”

“What’s that?”

“The Okinawan afterworld, sort of.”

I’d just given the sort of half-assed answer that would have gotten my anthropology teacher mad at me, but Toriko nodded as if it made sense to her.



“It’s like the end of this world, after all.”

Those words struck a chord in my heart.

I was alone with Toriko, on a beach at the end of the world.

If it’s this quiet, and we’re together, I wouldn’t mind staying forever...

That thought suddenly crossed my mind.

“I never thought I’d enjoy the sea so much.”

Toriko looked at me in surprise. “Why?”

“It’s just... I felt like the sea wasn’t the place for me. It was a scary place, full of party animals.”

“It’s not all that scary.”

“Not for you, I’m sure.”

I was scared. To the point where I had agonized that much over putting on a simple swimsuit.

“There’s this song, *Angura People Summer Holiday*. The lyrics are about otaku, *hikikomori*, and other social outcasts coming out to play on the beach in the middle of summer. I liked that song, you know?”

“Anglerpeople? Do they come up out of the sea?”

“Huh? No, I don’t think they came from the sea... just land, like normal.”

“Oh, so they have lungs to breathe.”

“Yeah, they can, even if they are underground people... Well, anyway, thanks for bringing me out here.”

I felt like she was misunderstanding something, but whatever.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. I’m always making you go along with my selfishness, so I was worried you might not like it,” Toriko said happily. “I’m so glad we could come together. I went to the beach with my parents a lot, but this is my first time coming with a friend.”

“It is?”

You didn't come with Satsuki-san? I was about to ask, then didn't.

"That's why I wanted to come so badly. I made a friend, so I was thinking I wanted to do all the things friends do. Though, I think I might've been being a bit pushy."

"Oh, you were aware of that?"

"So, I was being pushy..."

The way she obsessed about having after-parties might have been an effect of Toriko's image of "friendship," too. I felt like it was maybe a bit warped, but who was I to talk? I didn't know what the right things to do with a "friend" were either.

"...Well, we're here already, so let's do all the beach stuff we can."

"Yeah!"

Toriko's voice rose excitedly as she responded to me.

5

Here was my list of things to do on the beach with a friend:

Drink booze → Already done

Have a barbeque → No equipment

Play beach volleyball → No ball

Play in the sand → I'd want a shovel

Play beach flags → Too tiring

Hit on people → ...?

Huh? There was surprisingly a lot less to do than I'd thought.

That being the case, we drank, and took shots out into the ocean, our targets being the driftwood floating between the waves. The sound of 5.56 ammo being fired echoed across the white sands. I used the M4 CQBR that I had borrowed—no, I guess I was only supposed to be borrowing it until we escaped from Kisaragi Station, so technically I had nicked it—from Palehorse Battalion

for the first time.

The driftwood rose and fell on the other end of the scope. The gun would kick back each time I pulled the trigger, and I just couldn't seem to hit it.

"Don't try to stabilize it with just your arms. Place the stock tight against your chest. If you do that, you can absorb the recoil with your whole body. Don't be afraid. Relax, and hold the gun like you're hugging it."

I fired single shots as Toriko explained it to me, her third can of chuhai in hand.

I raised several pillars of water in the vicinity of the target before, finally, blasting the surface off the driftwood.

"I hit it!"

"Good!"

Toriko gave me a high five. Was this really okay...? Well, Toriko seemed to be enjoying herself, so it was probably fine.

"Okay, I'll go next." Toriko set down her chuhai, readied herself with the AK, then started firing away.

I sipped at an iced coffee with awamori as I watched the thick piece of driftwood disintegrate before my eyes. Her gun had no scope, unlike mine, and yet she didn't miss a single shot.

When Toriko finished shooting, I clapped. "Wow, that was awesome!"

"Heheh. I'm good now, but I couldn't hit a thing at first, you know. Mama was teaching me, but I think it must have been hard for her."

"Your mom must've been a good teacher, huh?"

"Nah, not really. If anything, Mom was awkward."

"Really? Well, I'm going to try shooting some more." Handing the container of alcohol off to Toriko, I readied the M4, and looked through the scope. I took aim at something in my field of view, which had been magnified 4X...

"Hm? What's that...? Is there something floating on the other side of the target?"

There was something big floating beyond the driftwood. The waves washed over a roundish white mass. It looked like it might be hairy, so I thought it could be an animal, but it was just floating there with no sign of movement.

“You’re right, there’s something there. Try shooting it?”

“Hmm?”

While we were fretting over what to do, voices came to us on the wind. The frivolous-sounding laughter of multiple men.

We looked at one another.

Someone’s here? Other than the two of us...?

The moment I had that thought, I was hit with a violent and unpleasant sensation.

Following the laughter, there was the dull sound of something soft being struck, and a muffled cry.

Toriko turned to face the pier stretching away from the beach house. “That way.” Toriko snatched the Makarov from the deck chair, and walked off without hesitating. I hurried to follow her.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“I dunno, but this smells like trouble. You might not want to watch, Sorawo.”

“I may not seem like it, but I think I’ve seen a whole lot more scary stuff than you have, Toriko.”

Toriko turned back to glance at me, a look of surprise on her face.

I was thinking, *How do you like that?* when Toriko asked, “Sorawo, could you shoot a person?”

“Huh?”

“A person.”

...I wonder.

I couldn’t answer immediately. I agonized over it as we returned to the sandy beach, climbed the stone steps, and got out on top of the pier. Immediately,

human figures came into view. Lots of them.

Four were standing, while another three cowered.

All of them were men.

The four included a man in a jersey, a man in a tank top who had a tan, a man with a colored Mohawk, and a skinhead. The three on the ground were smaller... Maybe middle-school age? Two of them had fallen in unnatural positions, and they weren't moving. The other was curled into a ball, quivering. Mohawk man kicked the kid's head like it was a soccer ball.

The kid's head bounced off the concrete with a loud echo.

"Stop!" Toriko boomed from in front of me, holding the Makarov in both hands.

The four turned. When their gazes fell upon us, my body instinctively tensed.

These guys were bad news. They were what I might have called thugs. There was a violence in their eyes that was a step up from mere delinquents.

"If you don't back away from those kids, I'll shoot." Toriko's voice was incredibly cold; there was an intensity in it even greater than the time we met Abarato. This was the first time I was seeing Toriko serious. It sent chills down my spine.

The man with the Mohawk let out a shrill laugh. "Good evening, Toriko Nishina-san!"

The fact that Toriko's name had just come out of the mouth of a thug we didn't recognize made both of us stop in surprise.

The other men spoke in turn.

"Hey, hey, someone's getting ahead of herself!"

"What's wrong? Do you want us to kill them?"

"Well, she's got guts! I bet she's not even afraid of us!"

The man in the tank top looked at the fallen, unmoving boy's face and shouted.

"Whoa! He's dead!"

“Aw, geez. Now we’ve got a murder on our hands.”

“What a weakling.”

“Let’s do her next.”

The thugs approached, smirking. They seemed unfazed by the gun pointed at them. Did they think it was fake? Or assume she couldn’t shoot? Even if they did, it was odd not one of them mentioned the gun. No, but more than that, why did they know Toriko’s name...?

In our moment of confusion, the men got right up close to us. Because they had stopped us, Toriko’s response was delayed.

When I saw the depraved look on the face of the man reaching for Toriko, my head cooled rapidly. I raised my gun, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet expelled from the M4 hit the man in front of the group, the one with the Mohawk, and appeared to be sucked in to his throat. The muzzle raised from the recoil causing the second shot to miss.

Ignoring Mohawk as he slumped to the ground, I aimed my gun at the next one. Lowering the muzzle, I aimed for the abdomen. It was a large target. Still, of the three shots I fired, only one landed. Hitting him in the crotch, he went down like the legs had been swept out from under him.

Toriko fired, too. Two shots from the Makarov struck Tank Top right in the center of his chest. She backed up to stand beside me and fired twice more. The fourth man’s head shot back, and he fell backwards to the pavement.

The echoes of the gunshots faded. The four who had fallen did not move. When I took a deep breath, the gun smoke tickled my nose.

“...I was able to shoot,” I mumbled, lowering the M4.

“Y-You okay, Sorawo?” Toriko put a concerned hand on my arm.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Really...?”

My response may have been too easygoing, because the look of concern on Toriko’s face got even worse.

“Listen. I don’t know what to tell you, but when someone is trying to destroy me, it seems I can shoot just fine.”

“Destroy you...?”

“I don’t mean just physically, but emotionally, too.” When I tried to explain, it came out strangely stilted. Toriko raised her eyebrows.

“Sorry. I should have been the one to shoot. I’m sorry,” she said.

Don’t look so worried, Toriko.

I put my own hand on top of one that Toriko had put on my arm.

“I’m sure you planned to shoot, too. I could see you were in serious mode. That’s why I was able to shoot. I was able to support you when your reaction was slow, so it all worked out in the end.”

“But...”

When Toriko continued to protest, I raised a hand to silence her. “Besides, these guys aren’t human.”

“Huh...?”

I looked at the men, focusing my mind on my right eye. There was a scrap of fish net, dried-up seaweed, a bottle of detergent, a faded fishing bob and hook—basically, it was a pile of all the stuff you might find left on the beach, and it was in a shape that looked like a person.

These guys must have been a “phenomenon” from the other world, just like the Time-space Man, that appeared in human form.

“I had a flash of insight just before I shot. There was something that felt off about this from the beginning, right? We’ve been shooting for a while now, but they showed no signs of noticing, and though the things they said sort of matched the situation, they were kind of off, too.”

“Really...? They didn’t look anything other than human to me, you know?”

As Toriko spoke, two of the masses which still had heads raised them slowly, and shouted as if they were going to attack.

“Hey, hurry it up!”

“The king of the coast is coming!”

I had been letting my guard down, so I jumped. With the Makarov in one hand, Toriko quickly took aim and shot. *Crack, crack*, two shots rang out in quick succession, and two heads burst.

“Hahh, geez!”

Being caught by surprise must have frustrated her, because Toriko raised her voice in anger. My pulse was still racing.

“That... surprised me.”

“Surprised me, too. It’s fine—just take a deep breath.”

Toriko rubbed my back through the rash guard I was wearing with her left hand. Her hand was trembling a bit, too.

“Thanks to that, I was able to accept they weren’t human, but... Huh? Then that means...?”

Toriko’s eyes went from the thugs to the three boys who were collapsed nearby.

I nodded. “They’re not, either.”

“Seriously? I was this close to going and checking if they were breathing... Hold on, that’s something I should’ve done way sooner. What am I doing?”

Telling herself she needed to get it together, Toriko slapped her own cheeks. It was true that Toriko would probably have confirmed the enemy was defeated, and then immediately checked on the condition of the wounded.

Suddenly, there was a clunking sound from the beach. Looking in that direction, there was something lying on the shore where there had been nothing before.

It was the size of a dump truck, roundish and white, and looked like it had to be a big hunk of meat. A rotten smell came drifting on the sea breeze and caught in my nose.

The blue sea, the white sand, and the massive hunk of unidentified meat. I went into a bit of a daze, unable to process how out of place it was, and I

started to feel like the blue of the sky was gradually getting deeper.

It wasn't my imagination—it really was getting deeper. The blueness of the blue was too strong, to the point it was nearly black.

Finally, I realized it. That sky was never the real sky. Like with the windmill woman, from the time we first got here, what was above us was that blue light that lay beyond the other world. Had we been taking a leisurely vacation under it?

The dark blue covered the heavens, and the beach sank into night.

“What will you do? I wonder what you should do.”

Turning towards the groaning voice, one of the three fallen boys had stood up at some point. With the dark sea at his back, he looked like no more than a dark silhouette. That was the same even looking with my right eye. In the center of his face, just his teeth were shining.

“Didja know? The midnight sea off the coast glows brightly,” the shadow said calmly. The distinctive way he spoke jogged my memory. Of all the net lore stories that were set by the seaside, it was the one that creeped me out the worst—*At Suma Coast*. That was right. That one was set in Kobe, not Okinawa, and it was about three middle-schoolers attacked by a group of bikers. That line was spoken by the one that survived.

“Do ya think they'll take note of that? I know this sounds a bit nasty, but...” Speaking nonsense, the shadow began to wave his arms around.

“So-Sorawo, what is this?”

Toriko's voice was frightened, and I was no different. I desperately tried to remember what happened next in that story...

“You wouldn't know what I'm talking about, but when night comes, Satsuki Uruma suyus to the shore, too, and what will you do with Sorawo Kamikoshi?”

“...Satsuki?” Toriko mumbled to herself.

The shadow had spoken our names. When I realized what that meant, I shuddered.

“To-Toriko. Do you remember? When you were being taken in by the

windmill woman, you said something.”

“Huh?”

“There’s something beyond the blue light that is trying to contact us by causing fear in humans, and driving them mad. You said that, Toriko. Do you remember?”

Toriko looked back at me without a word, completely expressionless.

Seconds later, beneath the palm of my hand, I felt the goosebumps rise on Toriko’s skin.

“Gah...” Toriko gasped. Her wide eyes told me she remembered the things she had blurted out.

“Y-Yeah.”

“Keep your wits about you. Th-This is bad news. It’s *them*, trying to drive us nuts. Their sights are clearly set on us. They recognize us individually!”

“I... I already feel like I’m going crazy just from remembering it, okay?!”

“S-Sorry! I’m not confident I can handle this alone.”

“It’s fine, though! Sheesh!”

The motions of the shadow on the pier grew more and more violent. Shaking his head around like his neck was broken, the shadow screamed.

“With the phosphorescent stones, and squid, and flying fish, the midnight sea really shines! It’s amazing—it’s like the starry sky! Do you understand?!”

We were so afraid, we had started clinging to one another at some point. Out of nowhere, there was a voice that sounded like it was reading sutras.

“Annnnnn, myooooo, jiiii.”

There was a loud clattering and ringing from the direction of the beach house.

“The stairs!”

The moment Toriko said that, I realized the same thing.

Those stairs, where the used dining trays were piled, and the used bowls were scattered around—there was something coming down them.

Just when I thought the sound of things breaking had stopped, a small humanoid form emerged from the beach house.

“Jooooooooo, miiiiiii, shinnnnnnnn.”

The thing shouting with that ridiculously loud voice was a naked child. Even in the pitch darkness, I could tell it was naked for some reason. He was running towards us with incredible vigor, both arms and both legs swinging. Toriko and I both let out a scream, unable to restrain ourselves any longer.

It was scary, unbelievably scary. I felt like I was going crazy. It may be the only reason I maintained a tenuous grasp on my sanity was because what was happening in front of my eyes followed the depiction of events in a piece of net lore I had read before.

Desperately suppressing the urge to close my eyes and cower where I was, I looked at the child whose body was all green using my right eye. There was what looked like dried-up black cord, wrapped in cotton, and floating in the air. When I shot it with the M4, the white cotton went flying in the darkness. Toriko screamed and pulled the trigger on the Makarov. The black mass, which looked like a dried-up cloud ear fungus, was blown away by the bullet. At the same time, in my left field of vision, I saw the green child thin out, flatten, and vanish.

The slide on the Makarov in Toriko’s hands slid back, all of its bullets spent. I hadn’t been keeping count, but my M4 had to be running low on ammo, too.

“Toriko! Let’s run away!”

“Where?!”

I desperately squinted out over the edge of the pier. I was looking for that silver shine. I didn’t care where it led now, if I could just find a gate to the surface world...

My eyes stopped on an unexpected place. In the middle of the beach, beneath the beach parasol we had just been lounging around under, I could see just the slightest silver radiance.

Why there? It’s too convenient. Is this a trap?

No, it’s not, that’s—the hat! Hasshaku-sama’s hat! In our luggage!

“Run to the parasol!”

When I spoke, Toriko gave me a big nod.

The two of us held hands and took off running. I didn’t want to get any closer to the beach house, but we ran back along the pier, and descended the stairs to the beach. I turned back to take a glance, and regretted it just as much as you might expect. There were a whole lot of little green children looking our way out of a small gap in the beach house.

The walls of the building were packed with black string wrapped in cotton, and when I looked at them with my left eye—the one with normal vision—it looked like there were green-bodied children watching us from places where no person should have been able to stand. This was nothing any sane person should be looking at.

“Don’t look at the beach house. No matter what.”

“I already saw!” Toriko shouted, her face twitching.

As we ran towards the beach parasol, our feet getting stuck in the sand, a shadow standing up on the pier looked down on us. Had the fallen ones risen up again? Their number had returned to seven.

“Aaaa! Aaaaa! Aaaa!” The shadows cried out. Like babies. Like crows.

On the other side of the beach, past the other pier, the lighthouse was shining. The slowly revolving cone of light from the tower shone across the beach, licking at the dense forest behind the beach house.

Finally, we reached the parasol. Toriko snatched up the AK she had left on the deck chair, and removed the magazine before irritably shouting, “Aw, geez! I screwed up...!”

She had fully discharged the AK during target practice. We had more bullets, but no spare magazines. It didn’t look like there was time to be putting bullets into one, either. I handed her my own M4.

“Use it! I shouldn’t have fired all my shots yet.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll get the hat out of our luggage, so you keep watch while I do it!”

“...Okay. Listen, look towards the sea first.”

I turned back, and I realized hunks of meat were washing up from out in the open sea, one after another. There were already some that had been beached here and there, and they were peeling under their own weight. They were all covered in some sort of long hair, and there were exposed bones sticking out of the torn meat.

Globsters... That’s what unidentified chunks of meat that washed up on the shore were called. They could also be called whale blubber or the remains of unknown creatures, and several real instances of them had been documented, so this was not really a ghost story, it was more in the realm of marine biology or cryptozoology.

When the light from the lighthouse slid along the beach, the globsters illuminated by it began to bubble and writhe. What had looked to be no more than hunks of dead flesh trembled, then they sprouted eyestalks like those of a crab, legs like those of a caterpillar, and a variety of other unidentifiable organs.

“Isn’t that just too gross...?”

They seemed to take exception to my vague mumbling, and the many eyes that had issued forth from the surface of the meat turned towards me. I shuddered and looked away.

There was no place on this beach that was safe now. I dug my hand into our bags and fished around, grabbing the Ziploc bag that the hat was in and pulling it out.

I opened the bag, extracted the hat, and unfolded it. The silver halo around this foreign object Hasshaku-sama left us was the only tool available to us now.

“What do we do? Put it on and run?”

I shook my head in response to Toriko’s question. “I dunno if we can use it to escape into the surface world or not. Besides, that’d take too long!”

“Then...”

My mind raced. I had hypothesized this silver light that I saw on objects from the other world and glitches represented a point where the two worlds

touched. The first time we had visited Kisaragi Station, we had caught this light to return to the surface world.

Then, could this hat be the same?

I turned the hat inside out and laid it on the floor.

“If we use it right, I think we can make this hat into a gate. Try grabbing just the outer edge of the brim.

“Like this...?” Toriko grabbed the halo with clumsy fingers. I placed my own hand atop her quivering left hand.

“Move your hand like I do,” I said, then carefully guided Toriko’s fingers. Counter-clockwise, like a vortex.

“This is it? It’s okay?”

“It’s fine. Focus on your fingers. Don’t move your hand away from mine.”

With my eye, I could see her translucent fingers unraveling the light. Along with that light, the structure of the hat itself came apart in a spiral shape. It was like peeling an apple.

Nearby, the globsters were growing legs and staggering to their feet. Up above our heads, creatures with voices like a crow’s formed a flock, and they screamed as they circled overhead. The light from the lighthouse was closing in over the sand. If that light ever shone on us, I couldn’t help but imagine terrible things would happen to us.

“So-Sorawo. The hat—”

It seemed even with Toriko’s eyes, she could see the hat was coming apart into a bizarre shape. The finished vortex had no bottom. Looking into it, my eyes were sucked towards the center. The space around it was all drawn in.

I felt my body tilting, and then the two of us fell.

There was a sudden impact against my back, making me groan.

I hurriedly got up, and my eyes darted around. It was the beach—but not the same one as before. The sky was the reddish purple of just after the sun set. The chirping of insects flooded my ears all at once. This was the surface!

Next to me, blinking as she lay on top of the sand, was Toriko. Then things started falling around us with a thud. The parasol and deck chairs, the cooler box, and our luggage and guns.

Snapping to my senses, I searched for Hasshaku-sama's hat. *Where—where is it?!* I turned around in a frenzy, and was shocked. There was a big spiral-shaped hole in midair, and I could see the beach in the other world through it. The shore was illuminated by the sinister light of the lighthouse, and black shadows stood amidst ominous hunks of meat.

As I stood there frozen, the gate in midair gradually shrank, and then vanished without a trace.

"W-We're saved...?" said Toriko, who was lying on her side, out of breath. It seemed she hadn't seen what was on the other side of the gate.

"...It looks like we made it out. Somehow," I responded.

Toriko covered her face with her hands, and let out a long sigh.

"Wheew, I thought we were totally screwed this time." Toriko groaned in mental and physical exhaustion. "Where is this...?"

"Dunno... Somewhere in Okinawa, I guess," I answered offhandedly.

It was entirely possible it wasn't, though. I had the faint sense it was quieter than Okinawa here, and the air was clearer, too. It might not be one of the main islands, but a remote one. If I took my smartphone out of our luggage and checked a map app, I could find out in no time, but I didn't feel like it.

The moon was in the sky. In the distance, I could hear the cheering of people watching fireworks, and music playing from a loudspeaker. Far from the shore, fireworks of all colors flickered in the sky. It was the first time I'd ever been so happy to see strangers out, enjoying themselves on a summer night.

Looking down at a dazed Toriko, my eyes moved to the cooler lying beside her.

"Hey... You wanna drink what's left of the booze?"

"Uh, sure. I'm in. I don't think I can do anything but drink in this mood."

I was pretty sure we had already drunk a lot, but I was feeling totally sober.

Opening the cooler, I pulled out the last can of Orion Beer. I pulled the tab to open it, and reflexively drank the fizz that came out. I followed up by knocking it back for a sip, then passing it to Toriko. Toriko sat up, tilted the can, and drank it with a satisfied groan. One sip, then two sips, then three.

“Whew... Beer tastes good when you’re alive to drink it.”

“You said it.”

We sat on the sand, sharing a single can of beer, and looking up to the moon of the southern lands.

“Hasshaku-sama’s hat is gone. I was gonna make Kozakura buy it off me, too.”

“Ohh. That’s too bad, huh? But it did get us back here.”

“Well, sure. But what do I do now? I’m out of money. I splurged and bought a swimsuit, and there’s the cost of a hotel, and the flight back...”

As I clutched my head, Toriko comfortingly clapped me on the shoulder.

“I’m telling you, you’ll be fine. It’s all going to work out somehow.”

“You say somehow, but how exactly?”

“You can head back to the other world, and pick up something again, can’t you?”

“After what we just went through, how can you still say that?!” I said, giving voice to my exasperation, despite not meaning to.

But, well... I guess Toriko will be going, huh?

And, no matter what kind of frightening situation I go through, I probably will, too.

I listened to the gentle waves wash up against the sandy beach. When I handed Toriko the now much lighter can, a small silver glimmer caught my eye. Turning around, there was something under the tilted umbrella.

I picked it up, and it turned out to be a little spiral shell, maybe five centimeters long, and transparent like glass. I peered through it, and I could see a long, long spiral that it felt like you could fall down forever. It was dizzying, and I hurriedly averted my eyes.

“Whoa, pretty.” Toriko looked at my hands.

“Be careful, okay? This looks like an object from the other world.”

“Really? Well, let’s get Kozakura to buy it, then.”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

“See, it worked out somehow.”

I gave Toriko the side-eye as she emptied the can with a self-satisfied look on her face.

She’s just saying whatever... I thought, but I was struggling with the question of whether or not to tell Toriko what I had just seen through the gate.

Just before the hole that connected this side and the other side closed, on the beach in the other world—in the sea where that massive stone fortress loomed, darker than the dark sky behind it, green lights began to appear. The lights grew explosively in number, and it was soon as bright as the starry sky.

That sky of green stars outlined the figure of someone on the beach. It was a tall, long-haired silhouette I recognized.

Satsuki Uruma.

Standing alone on that beach was the woman who had vanished into the other world. The one Toriko was seeking.

File 7: Attack of the Ninja Cats

1

“Um, you’re Kamikoshi-senpai, right?” someone suddenly said to me as I was slurping cold soba noodles in the school cafeteria.

I looked up in surprise, and there was a woman I didn’t know, looking down at me from across the table. She looked sophisticated and wore a mini-length T-shirt dress with a men’s coat over top. She had a boyish short haircut, and her eyes were filled with a strong sense of purpose.

I panicked for a moment.

Who was she? I didn’t remember her. If she was calling me senpai, that presumably made her my kouhai, but I had no interaction with any of the first-year students. Uh, not that I had anything to do with the third-years, fourth-years, or even my fellow second-years, either.

There was nothing more unpleasant than being directly addressed by someone whose name and face you couldn’t remember. As I froze up and started dripping sweat, she asked me once more, very clearly: “You’re not Sorawo Kamikoshi? In second year of the general education program? Did I get it wrong?”

“Huh...? Oh... Yes, I am, why?” I answered in confusion. She nodded, looking relieved, then introduced herself.

“Sorry this is coming out of nowhere. I’m Akari Seto, from first year. I wanted your advice about something. Is now a good time?”

“...Advice?” I had no clue what she was talking about. “Erm... What do you mean? We’ve never met, right? Why ask me?”

“Because I think this one’s in your wheelhouse!” The girl sat herself down in the chair across from me without bothering to ask first. I never said this was a good time. I was in the middle of eating, too.

Exams for the previous term had ended, and the school was pretty sparsely populated at the moment. I came to the school cafeteria, which was open during summer break, in order to save money on food and air conditioning, only to be accosted by a stranger.

“My wheelhouse? What do you mean?” I asked, for lack of a better option, as I continued with my soba. The fact the girl across from me wasn’t eating anything only made this more uncomfortable. Order something, at least!

Having no idea how I felt, Akari Seto leaned in, and lowered her voice to a whisper.

“You can sense spirits, right, Senpai?”

“Huh?!” I cried out despite myself.

“I’ve heard rumors. They say your research is on scary stories.”

“Who told you that? We don’t choose research topics or anything like that in second year...”

Still, it was true I had talked to someone about that. I had mentioned my interest in true ghost stories, and that I liked abandoned ruins. When I first entered university, I was invited out for drinks a number of times, and my tongue slipped. I was still all excited back then. I even had hopes I’d find friends I could get along with.

It didn’t really work out, though, which is why I was still alone.

What are they saying about me while I’m not around? Despite my frown, Akari Seto kept talking.

“I was originally hoping to have one of your friends introduce me to you, but I couldn’t find anyone. It felt a bit rude, but I decided to look for you myself and —”

“How did you know who I was?”

“Oh, yeah! It was that eye! I had heard you’ve been known to put a blue color contact in just one eye occasionally.”

“Ohh...”

I messed up, I thought with a sigh.

My right eye had turned blue after making contact with the Kunekune. It stood out really badly, so I hid it with a black color contact, but I had come to school without it a number of times when I was feeling sleepy or just plain forgetful. That had been especially common during exam season, when I was so busy I ended up coming to school and letting people see my naked eye again and again, and it started to feel like too much of a bother to hide it. So, here I was again today, my eye uncovered.

I just wore jeans and whatever shirt came to mind, but this stupidly brilliant blue eye was making me stand out in a bad way. It was little wonder everyone thought I was putting in a contact to make it look like I had heterochromia. Yeah, of course no one normal was going to approach me like this.

“So, about what I wanted your advice on—”

“Hold on,” I cut her off as she tried to keep going. “I’m sorry, but you’ve misunderstood. I can’t sense spirits.”

“Huh?” Akari Seto’s face froze in surprise.

If she was striking up a conversation with me, a total stranger who didn’t look all that normal, that meant this girl was either:

- (1) Not normal herself
- (2) In a really bad spot
- (3) Up to no good somehow

Any one of those was going to be a headache for me, and I didn’t want to get caught up in whatever it was.

“You’ve got it wrong, so try someone else.”

“Please. Everyone’s been saying that you can help me for sure!”

Who’s everyone? They’re just saying whatever.

“Why don’t you go to a temple? Get an exorcism done or something.”

“I did go! But it did nothing.”

“Then maybe you’re imagining it... Why not go to the hospital?”

“At first, I thought I had lost my mind, too. But after being attacked so many times, there are limits to how far I can believe it’s all just an illusion.”

“Attacked? What? Shouldn’t you be going to the police first?”

“I don’t think the police can handle this.”

It was true that I enjoyed digging through true ghost stories and net lore. But if someone wanted my advice on them, that was a different matter. I wasn’t a medium or anything like that.

Slurping up the last of my soba noodles, I set my chopsticks down, and reluctantly asked her, “...What is it that’s bothering you?”

“Well...”

This time, it was her turn to hesitate.

“Um, I’m pretty sure you’re going to laugh at me for saying this, but...”

What’s with that attitude after bringing this up on your own? Spit it out already. As I irritably sipped my barley tea, which had been watered down by the ice in it, Akari Seto hesitantly spoke.

“Lately, I’ve been targeted by ninja cats, you see...”

I nearly spewed my tea.

“N-Ninja... cats?”

“Yes.” Akari Seto nodded, a serious look on her face.

The three possibilities I had considered popped up in my head once more.

She was: (1) not normal herself, (2) in a really bad spot, or (3) up to no good...

The answer is (1). Okay, we’re done here.

...Only we weren’t, because I had read about this before. Indeed, there was a net lore story that featured ninja cats.

“Ninja cats... She can’t mean...”

“You know about them, Senpai?!” As I mumbled to myself, Akari Seto pressed

for more.

“Well, yeah, but...” I turned a suspicious eye on her. “You’re sure you’re not screwing with me here? It’s a famous corypasta, you know? Ninja Cats, I mean.”

Hear me out for a moment. There’s been something weird going on around me since last week.

Let me say this up front: I’m not delusional, or schizophrenic, or sick in any other way.

Please, don’t laugh. This is serious.

Lately, I’ve been targeted by ninja cats.

This post became a widespread internet meme. The shift from the over serious lead-in was so intense, even I laughed the first time I read it.

That’s why I considered possibility (3). Maybe nasty people had decided to make fun of me by bringing up this story? They could be around here somewhere, snickering to themselves as they watched my reaction.

I turned around, scanning the largely deserted cafeteria. There was one student, eating leeks and liver while playing with her smartphone; one person in a white coat who looked like a grad student, asleep at a table with their head resting on their arms; and one old lady, collecting abandoned trays. None of them showed any interest in us.

“It’s famous?”

When she gave me a blank look, I suddenly lost my confidence. Even if it was common sense to an internet denizen like me, it might not be famous, or anything close to it, to a person who wasn’t as immersed in the net.

“Er, well, not that I’d know,” I mumbled, and Akari Seto started talking fast.

“I’m not confident they’re... ninjas, really. They just kind of look that way. They look like plain ordinary cats, until they get up on their hind legs and chase after me.”

“R-Right...”

“It’s not just one, either, you know. I was running away in fear, so I didn’t get a proper look, but there were several. They make a racket outside my house at night, and rattle at the windows.”

...What’s with this story?

“Since it started, I feel like I’m being tailed wherever I go. I figured this might be something spirit related, so I tried going to a temple for advice, but they said this was a bit beyond them. The exorcism was no use.”

Well, they’re cats...

“That being the case, I thought it might be best to get help from an expert. The rumors said if I went to Kamikoshi-senpai, she’d sort me out.”

“Seriously, where did that rumor come from?”

I gazed up to the ceiling with a sigh. I never thought someone would come to me with a story like this. I thought I had been avoiding all the hassle of interacting with people, but these rumors got exaggerated all on their own, and came to me in an even more bothersome form... What was I even supposed to do about this?

“Senpai, what should I do?”

“Huh? I don’t know.” I accidentally said exactly what I was thinking. “I mean, I told you already, didn’t I? I don’t have the ability to sense spirits, and I’m not an expert, or anything of the sort.”

With that said, I pushed my chair back and stood up.

“Sorry, but I can’t help you. It’s a bother to even have to hear about it.”

“I... see.”

When I said that in a strong tone, Akari Seto hung her head in disappointment. She looked like she was seriously troubled, so I hesitated.

No, but it was clearly impossible for me to take this seriously. I mean, ninja cats? Of all things?

From what I heard, there was something of a drug epidemic in universities these days. This girl looked pure enough, but for all I knew she could just be

high on something. Scary stuff. I was getting out of here before she got violent, or tried to push her drugs on me.

“W-Well, that’s how it is, so...”

I gently lifted my tray, trying not to agitate her, and tried to go return it, but Akari Seto stood up forcefully, startling me and making my body tense up.

“Eek!”

Akari Seto walked around the table with firm steps and stood in front of me as I, having both my hands occupied by the tray, was unable to move.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Here—it’s my phone number. If you change your mind... and you feel like helping me, call me any time.”

As she said that, she put a pink tag with a phone number hastily written on it on the tray I was holding. Without waiting for my response, Akari Seto bowed her head slightly, then turned around and walked off without looking back.

I watched her go in bewilderment, but she came to a sudden stop right before leaving the cafeteria. She seemed to be staring at something outside. Eventually, she took a deep breath, and headed outside with resolve.

“What in tarnation...?” I said with a fake Kansai accent.

But, no, seriously, what in tarnation *was* that all that about? It was exhausting.

I brought the tray back to the return window, and thought for a while.

...Well, it did seem like she was in enough trouble to come to me for advice. Guess I can at least hold on to her phone number.

I peeled the pink tag off of the tray, and played with it in my fingers as I headed for the exit.

I’m such a nice person. I’ve got a heart... I’ve got so much heart.

As I left the cafeteria, singing my own praises, I came to a stop despite myself.

The summer sun beat down on the plaza in front of the cafeteria. Under the eaves and in the bushes, anywhere there was shade there were cats lying

about. It was a familiar sight. People who came out of the cafeteria or the school store would feed them, so this place had become a hangout for the cats living at the university.

Those cats were all staring at me.

After the conversation we'd just had, it flustered me a little.

"...What in tarnation?" I whispered to myself, then walked out onto the plaza. I felt eyes on me from all directions. They had totally ignored me when I came.

I didn't think it was scary, but it sure was unsettling. I cut straight across the plaza, and turned back when I was done. They were all still looking at me.

"...Weird."

I shook my head, and left the plaza behind in a hurry.

The tag in my hand was damp with sweat.

2

"...And that's what happened to me yesterday," I finished telling the story in Kozakura's dimly lit room.

Toriko was beside me, cackling with laughter.

"N-Ninja! Cats!"

Toriko collapsed on the arm of the sofa, gasping for breath through her laughter.

"Do you have to laugh so hard?"

"Hey! They sound cute!"

I don't know what had tickled her funny bone, but this was apparently a laugh riot for her. The weirdo.

"Ninja cats, hm... That must be some hard stuff she's been doing. Don't get into drugs, even if she offers them to you, Sorawo-chan. You're already messed up enough as is."

"I won't, and I'm not!"

Kozakura was as rude as ever. Today, she was drinking a ridiculously oversized glass of cola through a straw. It seemed that she drank it chilled in summer, at least.

“Kinda harsh, when we bought you all those souvenirs in Okinawa, don’t you think?”

“How long do you plan to keep bringing up something that happened more than half a month ago?” Kozakura said while chomping on the ice that was in her glass. “I’ll gladly take your gifts, but I still haven’t forgotten the way you tormented me with pictures of tasty food I couldn’t have.”

“How long do you plan to keep bringing up something that happened more than half a month ago?”

“I’m not one to forget grudges, okay?”

It had been a while since we got together like this. It wasn’t just Kozakura—I hadn’t seen Toriko for a while since coming back from Okinawa, either. I’d been too busy with last term’s exams to do anything else.

I’d taken a number of days off just before the exam period, which honestly made it tough. Though, I’m sure someone with friends would have been able to borrow lecture notes from the lectures they missed... Ultimately, I had to give up on a number of credits.

After enjoying the beach resort Toriko and I had all to ourselves in the other world, we escaped from nearly going insane, but ended up on Ishigaki Island, four hundred kilometers from the main island in Okinawa. We could have flown back to Tokyo the next day, but after the terror we experienced on that beach, Toriko and I were both mentally ground down.

We needed rest. Real rest...

That being the case, Toriko and I booked a nearby resort hotel, and we stayed for three whole days. A *real* resort hotel. Not anything like that New York-style pension, or whatever it was supposed to be.

Sure, it was costly. But it was a necessary expense.

We could just earn that money back in the other world. Yeah, this was an

investment in our ability to do just that—is what we told each other. We stayed in a super expensive room at same-day arrival pricing, swam in the pool, ordered cocktails by the poolside, and went beach-combing for bits of coral. Then we took a taxi into town at night to eat Ishigaki beef and locally caught fish, then send Kozakura pictures of all the tasty food and alcohol. Thanks to that, we came back to Tokyo refreshed, so you could say it was a necessary use of time... Credit cards sure are convenient, huh?

However, when we saw Kozakura, she was all grumpy. *What's wrong with you people? I was worried, and now you come back all nicely tanned? I'm gonna kill you*, she snapped, but we managed to mollify her with a massive pile of souvenirs. Some of them were still piled on the low table in Kozakura's room.

"You could've helped the girl out. I want to see the ninja cats, too," Toriko, having recovered from her laughing fit, said irresponsibly.

"No way. I'm not some kind of medium," I responded with a scowl.

"You didn't think the other world could be involved?"

"Whaa? I doubt it. These are ninja cats, right? They're not scary. Everything we ran into before now was scary."

...Huh?

I detected something slightly off about what I had said.

What could it be? I don't think I said anything particularly wrong.

"It sure was crazy last time, huh? I thought I was going to lose it for real," Toriko said, and I shuddered.

When I remembered how it felt, I felt like I was going to lose my cool, too. Was that what the "field of flowers" Kozakura had experienced when I was dealing with the windmill woman was like? It was a saturation attack of fear, with scary things happening one after another—if Toriko and I had succumbed, I wonder what would have happened to us by now. Those hunks of meat that washed up on the beach. The black shadows that called our names. The screaming green children running towards us. It all rushed through my mind, and...

“...Sorawo? Are you okay?”

“Sorry, I blanked out there. What were we talking about again?”

“About the ninja cats being connected to the other world.”

“Oh...”

I took one of the dried tomatoes flavored with salt from Ishigaki Island that was in the pile of souvenirs on the table, and threw it into my mouth. The salt and sweetness gradually brought me back to my senses.

This state, where recollection of past fear triggered a lapse in consciousness, was something we had both experienced a number of times on Ishigaki Island. We already knew how to deal with it. We just had to focus on what we were feeling right now. The reason we’d cut off our vacation and come home was that we had both more or less stopped showing symptoms. It looked like I wasn’t fully recovered just yet, but I could handle this much.

Toriko didn’t rush me; she waited. I chewed on the tomato as I brought my mind back to the original conversation.

“Uh, listen, if the other world is tied up in this, that makes me even *less* eager to get involved. I have no guns, remember?”

That’s right—I was walking around unarmed recently.

On the return trip from Ishigaki Island to Tokyo, we ran into the issue of what to do with our guns. No matter how small the parts we broke them into were, there was the chance that they would be X-rayed at the airport and discovered because of their shape. That was why, ultimately, we elected to send them by ship.

Two assault rifles, two Makarovs, and the associated bullets. Toriko disassembled them, split them into four packages, and sent them on their way. We floated the idea of taking the leisurely route home by ferry, but I couldn’t justify taking any more time away from school, so we took a plane instead.

The guns would arrive in Tokyo in four to five days. Just in case something went wrong, we used a throwaway address, and had them delivered to a delivery pickup locker in Hamamatsu-chou Station.

“Have you already picked them up, Toriko?”

“Long since. I’ve brought the Makarov for now.”

“Thanks.”

Toriko passed me the Makarov inside a paper bag from Dean and DeLuca. Just holding the grip was enough to make me feel a sense of ease. I had gotten totally used to this weight and shape.

While I was loading the magazine with 9mm bullets, Kozakura decided to voice her exasperation. “When I heard you were sending the guns separately, I was beside myself with worry, thinking, ‘What if they use my house for the delivery?’”

“Clearly we weren’t going to do that, okay?”

“I don’t know. You did send the souvenirs here, didn’t you?”

“I know what’s okay and not okay to send, all right?”

As I looked up with a frown, I noticed there was an animal ornament, one just about the size that would fit on the palm of your hand, sitting on top of Kozakura’s desk. It hadn’t been there last time we came. It looked like it was porcelain.

“Oh, where did that come from? It’s cute!” I exclaimed despite myself, and Kozakura looked at me with pride in her eyes.

“It’s a tanuki. Remember what you were saying last time? How those three old women might really have been tanuki?”

I did indeed remember saying something like that. I’d said it, thinking it might help calm Kozakura’s nerves after beings from the other world showed up on her doorstep. It was just consolation, though.

“At first, I thought it was stupid, but I realized that thinking it was the work of tanuki helped lessen the fear. I found a cute one at the nearby craft market, so I bought it.”

“You’re giving the unknown fear a name so you can control it, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. Thanks to this tanuki, I can sleep again.” She put the ornament

on top of her hand, gazing at it lovingly.

Come to think of it, last time we came she had all the lights on, but today things were back to how they originally were. The entrance and hall were dark. If my consolation had managed to grant her some peace of mind, I was glad.

The animal with black spots around its eyes looked at me from on top of Kozakura's hand, seeming troubled. It was cute. Its short, fat, striped tail was, too...

Huh?

"Kozakura, that's not a tanuki."

"Huh?"

"It's a raccoon. See the stripes on the tail."

Kozakura blinked, then looked down at the ornament.

"What are you talking about? Tanuki have stripes on their tails, too."

"They do not. That there is a raccoon."

"Raccoons dig through the trash, don't they? They're vermin."

Toriko's merciless comment made Kozakura's eyes go wide in anger. "Shut up! This is a tanuki! No matter what anyone says, it's a tanuki!"

"Huh? But..."

"What is with your jabbering? Do you want to tear me and Ponpoko apart that badly?!"

"N-No, um..."

Aw, crap. Shouldn't have said anything. I was regretting it, when—

The doorbell rang.

Kozakura, who had risen from her chair with a look of indignation, shuddered and came to a stop.

Ding dong. The bell echoed through the house again.

Kozakura delicately returned her "tanuki" to the top of the desk, then clicked the mouse. One of her monitors showed outside the front door. There was a

man wearing a polo shirt and a cap standing there.

“...Who is it?”

“*Delivery! It’s a large package, where do you want it put down?*” the man asked in a loud voice, wiping the sweat from his face with a towel. He seemed to be a delivery man... He didn’t look suspicious.

“Large package?” Kozakura asked dubiously, casting a look of suspicion towards me and Toriko. We both shook our heads. We had no idea what it was.

Kozakura got out of her chair and headed for the front door.

It was taking her a while to come back. Toriko and I were discussing what it could be when a voice shouted from the entranceway.

“Come here a minute—both of you!”

We looked at one another, both noticing the voice’s suppressed anger.

We had a bad feeling about this, but we walked down the dark hallway to the entrance. When we got outside, Kozakura was glaring at us from under the eaves.

“Would you care to explain what *that* is?”

I looked in the direction she was pointing, and the middle of her weedy lawn was occupied by a machine that was painted red and white. It was about 1.8 meters tall and shaped like a gate. The bottom of each leg had caterpillar treads, so this was apparently a vehicle. The rear of the vehicle had two seats split between the left and the right.

“Well? What is this thing?”

The receipt Kozakura thrust towards me had her address written on it. It was unmistakably my writing. The product name was “Bunmei Agricultural Machines - Tobacco Control Work Vehicle AP-1.”

“...Ohh!”

Suddenly, it came back to me. It was our second day on Ishigaki Island, and Toriko was already drunk by early evening. We went into town, and we bought this work vehicle we found at an agricultural machinery and equipment store on

impulse.

The AP-1 was originally designed to drive with the ridge of a field in the middle of what looked like the gate-like structure's opening, allowing the rider to perform planting and harvesting work while seated. I had just been thinking how convenient it would be to have a vehicle in the other world while we were rescuing Palehorse Battalion. When I saw these things moving around in the tobacco fields on Ishigaki Island, it seemed just right. It ran on treads, so it would be fine on uneven terrain, and it just so happened to be a two-seater, too. *Wow, wouldn't that just be perfect for Toriko and me? I'll buy it.*

...Credit cards sure are convenient, huh?

"Sorawo, you actually bought it...?"

Even Toriko was acting surprised, so I panicked. "Huh? You approved, too, didn't you...? You did, right?"

"Hmm? Did I?"

Not a reassuring response. Well, I was drinking, too, so I couldn't be that confident in my memories, either.

"What I want to ask is: why was it sent to my house?!"

There was a vein pulsing on Kozakura's pale forehead.

"Uh, erm, probably 'cause there's nowhere to put it at my place, you know? Hahah... hah."

"Don't you hahahah me. What are you going to do with this? I absolutely can't take it for you."

"Oh, no, I'll use it, I'll use it. I'll be taking it to the other world."

"How?"

"I'll find a gate it can fit through, and then..."

"When?"

"What do you mean, 'when'?"

When I answered her question with a question, Kozakura exploded. "I'm telling you to move it already! If this thing isn't off my doorstep three days from

now, I'm going to harvest the grass in Shakujii Park, roll cigarettes with it, and force you to smoke them. Now hurry up and find a gate!"

3

"Gates are pretty hard to come by, huh?"

"I was hoping there'd be one nearby, but no such luck..."

It was a few hours after we'd practically been thrown out of Kozakura's house. Toriko and I were in a private room in the rest stop at Shakujii Park, resting our weary legs.

Having been walking around out in the heat, we were obviously exhausted. I was dripping with sweat, so the breeze that came in from the open balcony felt good.

There was the plate from an order of curry rice in front of me, and the tray from a large order of cold soba noodles in front of Toriko. We had finished both.

"They've got beer, you know..." Toriko said, leaning her head back and looking at the menu posted on the wall. Her usually silky blonde hair was matted to the nape of her neck with sweat today. I groaned approvingly despite myself, then hurriedly shook my head.

"No, no... It's still too early. If we drink now, we're finished."

"Finished, huh?"

"I have to admit it's super tempting, though."

Setting aside how we were going to transport the AP-1 to it, we had just been tasked with finding an easy-to-use gate. There were a number of gates we had used to go back and forth to the other world, but most were either no longer usable, or in Okinawa, so they weren't practical. The only stable one was the elevator in Jinbouchou, and even that one wasn't guaranteed to last forever.

We wanted a gate that was in an accessible place in the surface world, and which only required a short time to pass through the interstitial space between the surface and the other side. I didn't know if anything that convenient existed, but if I could find a connection to the other world using my right eye,

then Toriko might be able to force it open with her left hand. We would use that to search for a usable gate, or maybe develop one of our own. That was our intention when we set out from Kozakura's house, and spent a few hours roaming the neighborhood. Up to this point, we hadn't even found a place that looked like it might be what we were after.

"The gate in Oomiya was the back door of an abandoned building, the one in Jinbouchou is an elevator, and Chichibu's was a torii gate at a shrine. If it were some place like a door or a corridor, that'd be easy to understand," Toriko said, resting her elbows on the low table. The short UV protection glove that covered her translucent left hand—was it made of silk, or linen? It might feel like a bother to have to wear it, but it looked comfortable.

"But it's not necessarily going to be like that, right? When we used Hasshaku-sama's hat in Shinjuku, we couldn't tell where the gate started or ended."

"Yeah. We jumped into a train from Kisaragi Station, and the gate to the U.S. forces training grounds was the area around the offering box itself."

"We went through a hollow in a tree to get to Naha, too. There's not much in common between them, huh?"

I was surprised when we suddenly came out onto the roof of a building that time. I'd expected to come out somewhere in Okinawa, but that was a street bustling with tourists. I'm just glad we didn't appear in the middle of a crowd, still touting assault rifles.

That reminded me of something—when we returned from the other side to the surface, it didn't feel like we really passed through the interstitial space. The elevator required a certain process on the way there, but it brought us back immediately, and in cases where we had forced a gate open, like the times we encountered Hasshaku-sama or Kankandara, we were back in the surface world in no time. The one exception would be the train we used to return from Kisaragi Station. From the surface to the other side, and from the other side to the surface—was there some meaning behind the asymmetry there?

I was mulling it over when Toriko looked over my shoulder.

"Oh. A cat."

I turned to look, and a light brown tabby cat was walking past through the shadow cast by the building. It had no collar, but was well-groomed for a stray. It probably never missed a meal, hanging around in a place like this. When a parent and child who had been drinking ramune outside the shop went over to give it some attention, the cat darted into the bushes to avoid the hassle.

“Do you think ninja cats use shuriken?” Toriko asked.

I shook my head. “I think they had these jagged metal blades.”

“Whoa, scary. What’s with that?”

“I think that’s how the story went.”

“Did the girl who was asking you for advice say that?”

“Nah. That’s not it...”

I was about to say something, then I had a flash of realization.

What was that just now? Where did the bit about jagged metal blades come from? Akari Seto never said a word about them—

“Huh? Huh?”

“Sorawo.” Toriko leaned over the low table, pressing her right hand against my cheek. Looking closely at my confused face, she spoke to me in a concerned tone.

“Are you okay? Want me to slap you in the face?”

“Huh? Why so violent?”

“I thought it might help wake you up.”

“No, no thank you. Please, don’t.”

As I watched Toriko’s hand pull away, I tried to sort out my thoughts. I had gotten the sense something was off when we were talking at Kozakura’s house. I knew why now.

I remembered. The Ninja Cats cospasta that had spread across the net as a funny meme had, in fact, originated in a ghost story.

“Lately, I’ve been targeted by ninja cats.” The post seemed complete in and of

itself, but there was actually more to it. The poster was on 2channel's Occult board, and was legitimately seeking advice about being attacked by ninja cats. Two-legged cats that carried jagged metal blades.

The impact of the concept was so great I had completely forgotten. What kind of story was it? I tried pulling it up on my smartphone, but it wasn't easy to find. It was a minor ghost story buried in a forest of internet lore. According to my vague memories, a number of volunteers tried to catch the ninja cats on film, then the whole thing faded out without anyone really understanding what had happened...

When I explained that to Toriko, she gave me a look that said she'd figured as much.

"See, I told you it had something to do with the other world. I thought it was strange from the beginning. I mean, there's no way she'd bring up that weird old story just to tease someone she's never even talked to before."

"Sure, that's true, but you're arguing with the benefit of hindsight."

"You're just not very perceptive, Sorawo."

While I was getting upset about how rude she was, Toriko's hands reached out for my face again. I brushed them away and said, "Don't try to rub my face all the time! What are you doing that for?!"

"It's fine."

"No, it's not fine at all."

"You got her contact info, right? Why not give her a call?"

"I don't wanna, it's too much of a hassle."

"You're not gonna help her?"

"There's no way to be sure the other world is involved. It's just your theory. Besides, we have other things to do," I said, then stood up. "Let's go. If we don't hurry and find that gate, we're going to be forced to smoke grass."

"I don't want that."

"I need Kozakura-san to buy that shell soon, too. That's what we originally

came to get done, but she chased us off.”

When we escaped from the beach in the other world, we had gained a translucent spiral shell, almost as if in exchange for Hasshaku-sama’s hat. It was a foreign object from the other world which, if you stared into it, let you see infinite spirals. For the moment, it was the only object we could convert to cash. Until Kozakura’s anger subsided, it was of no use to us, though.

“Okay. Well, once we can find a gate, let’s help her.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Only think about it?”

I left the rest stop together with a dissatisfied Toriko. Squinting my eyes against the sunlight as I put on a hat, I happened to turn around. I saw the light brown tabby cat from before, sitting in the bushes, staring at me.

4

Let’s find a gate while it’s light out, then drink beer when night comes.

That had been our emotional support, but now our search, which had taken us all over Shakujii Park on a hot day, was about to end in failure.

I couldn’t meet Toriko’s eyes as she sat down across the table from me. “H- Hey, it’s just the first day! Let’s not let it bug us!” I said.

“Sorawo.”

“Whew, this beer is good! Where do you want to look tomorrow, Toriko?”

“Sorawo.”

“Do you want to try stopping at every station along the Seibu Line?”

“Sorawo-san, how about we take a reality check?”

“Okay...”

I hung my head, laying my mug of beer on the table.

We were in a tavern near the station that served yakitori. Looking out the

window, it was impossible not to notice the number of cats out front.

Things had changed just after we left the park. The cats trailed us from behind. These were ordinary cats that walked on four legs, of course. Given what we had been talking about just before, it did make me uneasy, but at that point I still had my composure. I thought the way they earnestly pumped their legs, following us in the shadows, was adorable.

However, as time passed, things got weird. The number of cats gradually grew. From one to two, then from two to three...

Out of the alleyways, over the walls, and from the shadows, new cats appeared to join a procession led by me and Toriko. When we stopped, the cats stopped, too. If we approached them, they scattered. They wouldn't let us touch them, but when we gave up and started walking again, they were soon in line behind us.

I couldn't help but be worried about what was going on behind us, which ultimately prevented us from making much progress on our gate hunt. It wasn't dark out yet, but we called off the search at 6:00 p.m. in the evening, and fled into a tavern.

Outside, we could hear people crying out in surprise at the unusual sight of all these cats lounging around, and taking pictures. There were over ten of them, so it made for quite a scene. I was watching them from my seat by the window, dead tired, when the yakitori platter we had ordered arrived.

"This absolutely has to be caused by the story you were told, right?" Toriko said as she snatched a chicken and onion skewer.

"Or maybe the cats just like the smell of yakitori?"

"How about you stop using arguments you know you don't even believe yourself?"

"Okay..." Having no response to that, I dejectedly chewed on a piece of gizzard.

The other world read the images of terror in our minds, and manifested them as aberrations—if this hypothesis was correct, Ninja Cats might fit that pattern.

“I don’t really get it, but we’re already caught up in this. That girl who asked you for advice... Seto-san, was it? I’m telling you, you should try contacting her,” Toriko said, bringing her face up to the window and squinting at the cats outside. “I don’t see any particularly ninja-y ones out there, though. You think they’ll show up, too, eventually? Or are these little guys going to suddenly get up on their hind legs, and come at us with blades?”

“If they’re hiding blades in their fur, that’s more surprising than actually scary. I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Either way, I think it’s a weird situation we’re in. Let’s give her a call. We could even do it right now.”

“Uhh... But...” When I resisted the idea, Toriko looked concerned.

“What’s the matter, Sorawo? That’s weird.”

“Not really.”

“No... Usually, while you might grumble, when someone’s in trouble, you help them, right? Why are you so against it this time?”

“...”

“Come on, tell me.”

When Toriko looked straight at me, I hesitantly confessed. “...I’m not so good with ghost stories that involve cats.”

“Huh...? You’re a cat hater?”

“No way. I love cats. That’s why I don’t want to experience scary stories that involve them. I wouldn’t want to become afraid of them.”

“Okay...? I think I get it? But if the other world is involved, even if they might look like cats, they might actually be something else, right?”

“But then I’d have to shoot them, wouldn’t I?”

“Huh?” Toriko looked at me dumbfounded.

“Cats are cute. I don’t wanna shoot them...” I mumbled between bites of chicken breast with wasabi.

Toriko looked at me, blinking, then slowly nodded her head. “Got it. Leave it

to me. If anything puts you in danger, I'll be the one to—"

"Wh-Whoa, hold on, what are you saying?" I looked back at Toriko with disbelief. "Don't you think cats are cute, Toriko?"

"They're cute, sure. But animals are stronger than humans, so I don't let my guard down with them."

"Still, pointing a gun at them is a bit much..."

"Come on, Sorawo. What I'm talking about are some cat-like monsters that are coming at us with jagged blades. Not the little guys lazing around out there."

"Urgh."

"I don't know what's up, but if we leave things like this, they may become our enemies, too, you know? You like cats, don't you? Do you want to spend the rest of your life in fear of them?"

"N-No way."

"Then call her. What we need to do is the same as always, right? Find the ninja cats, use your right eye to reveal their true form, then take them out. Problem solved. Simple, right?"

"Urgh."

"If you won't make the call, I will. Give me the number, would you?"

"Urgh... Fine, I'll call."

My resistance finally collapsing, I pulled out my phone. Retrieving the tag that was still stuffed in my pocket, I took a deep breath, and then dialed the number written on it. She answered on the third ring.

"Hello, Seto speaking."

"U-Um, this is Kamikoshi..."

"Oh, Senpai! You called!"

Her surprisingly chipper voice left me feeling a bit deflated. I could hear the sounds of daily life from the other side of the phone. Did she live with her family?

“Erm... So, about the thing you were asking for advice about yesterday... Is now a good time?”

“Yes! You mean the ninja cats, right?”

“Y-Yeah. Has your situation changed at all?”

“No. It’s the same as ever... How about you, Senpai? Were you able to see something?”

“...See something?”

“Um, with spirit vision, or something like that.”

Oh, so that was what she meant. For a moment there, I thought she knew about my right eye’s power, and I felt pretty shocked. “I’m telling you, I’m not like that.”

“But you are able to give me advice, right?”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up too high. For now, I’d like to meet up and talk. Can you come out to Ikebukuro? Tomorrow, maybe?”

“Yes, I’ll be there! Thank you very much!”

“S-Sure. I’ll message you the time and place.”

I hung up, then let out a sigh. Calling people I didn’t know always made me feel tense. While I was trying to focus myself again, Toriko reached out with her right hand and tried to pat me on the head.

“Wh-What?”

“You managed to make the call. Good girl.”

“You’re clearly making fun of me, right?”

“Not at aaaall.”

While I was batting her arm away, a cilantro salad arrived. “Will you come with me, too, tomorrow?” I asked Toriko once she withdrew her hand.

Toriko tilted her head to the side and smiled. “Wouldn’t I just be in the way of your little date?”

“...”

“I’m kidding! Don’t make that face,” Toriko said with a laugh, putting some of the salad on her plate. I was mad, so rather than respond, I stole her share of the gizzard and ate it.

5

“Ah! Senpai! Over here!”

11:00 a.m.

When I headed for the underground plaza by the Metropolitan entrance of JR Ikebukuro Station, Akari Seto spotted me first and was waving her arms. The way her voice carried well and her gestures showed no sign of caring what others might think already had me intimidated. Still, I was glad that she was the one to call out to me. We had only met briefly the day before yesterday, so I was less than confident I would be able to recognize her.

Today she was wearing a large T-shirt and denim jeans, giving her a rough look. She also carried a basket bag made from all-natural materials. As for me, I was wearing a striped T-shirt with a shirt over it, along with white bottoms and sneakers. On my head I wore the low-brimmed newsboy cap I bought in Naha. When we first met in the university cafeteria I was in the sort of totally relaxed outfit I would only wear around the neighborhood, but today I had managed to dress myself properly.

This was the best I could do, so give me a break.

When we were at Kisaragi Station, Toriko told me to dress well enough that my showy right eye didn’t stand out, so I was trying my hardest.

“Thank you for coming. I hope you’ll be able to help me today!” Akari Seto said.

“No, uh, don’t get your hopes up, okay? Seriously...” I answered, feeling overpowered by her.

“Do you want to get tea somewhere? I’m paying.”

“Uh, hold on a moment. There’s another person coming, too.”

“Huh? Who might that be?”

She seemed surprised, so I told her. “Her name is To... Nishina. She’s the one who told me to help you out.”

“Oh, I see! Is she a specialist in this stuff, like you are, Senpai?”

“Uh, no, I told you, it’s not like that...”

As I was trying to deny it, a voice came from behind me. “Hey there. I’m a specialist.”

When I turned around, Toriko was there. Today, she was wearing a shirt with frilly ruffled sleeves and a corset skirt with a flower pattern. On her head she wore a narrow-brimmed straw hat. Like always, this woman was rocking an outfit that would never have looked good on me...

“Morning, Sorawo. What’s up? Why the sharp look?”

“Morning. I was just thinking how pretty you are today, too.”

“Huh? Compliments, this early in the morning? You’re making me blush.”

Shoot, I shouldn’t have said that.

Perhaps having been caught by surprise, Seto seemed a bit bewildered. “Erm... Are you Nishina-san? Nice to meet you, I’m—”

Toriko smiled. “Toriko’s fine. You’re Akari?”

“Oh! Yes.”

“Nice to meet’cha.”

It was the same when she met me, so I guess Toriko goes by her first name by default. I guess I’ll follow suit.

“Hold on, Toriko. Since when were you a specialist?”

“Can’t I be? Wouldn’t you say we really are specialists? I mean, we’ve survived so far.”

“I feel like we’ve been treading the line between life and death pretty much every time, though.”

As she listened to me and Toriko argue, Akari’s face gradually darkened. “It

really is dangerous, then, like I thought...”

“Huh? No, I wonder about that...”

For some reason, I hesitated to say it. There was nothing to wonder. If the other world was involved, it was obviously dangerous.

“For now, let’s hear your story. What are these ninja cats like? Cute? Do you have a video or anything?” Toriko asked in a lively voice.

“Let’s go inside somewhere first,” I interjected. “You don’t need to cover Toriko’s drinks, too.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.” Akari nodded meekly. Together with Toriko, who protested, *Why not? Isn’t that kinda mean?*, we got aboard the elevator that went above ground.

“So, you know how cats have a way of gathering around?”

Once we had secured seats for ourselves in an Italian tomato cafe, just before the lunch rush, Akari immediately started talking.

“It was about a month ago. I ran into a gathering of cats. It was evening, and I was coming out of the convenience store after stopping there on the way back from university when I heard hushed voices. There was something... weird about them.”

Akari hesitated at that point, so Toriko pressed her for more information. “What do you mean, weird?”

“It was a baby’s voice, then an old man’s voice, and then a high-pitched voice like a Vocaloid speaking in turn. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I could hear them repeatedly saying, ‘We’ve found the mark,’ and, ‘It will come soon.’ It seemed strange, so I went around behind the convenience store to look—and there were a whole lot of cats. Close to twenty of them, scattered all around the parking lot. They all turned to glare at me, then, *whoosh*, they took off. At the time, all I thought was, *Ohh, I guess I was interrupting. Sorry.* But from then on, every night...”

Akari pulled out her smartphone, laying it on top of the table.

“This is from yesterday. I took it right after Senpai called.”

When she pressed the play button on the video, it showed the curtains in front of her window. The moment she raised the volume, there was the sound of an impact against the window.

...Thud! ...Bang! There was something intermittently beating on the window from outside.

A hand stretched out from the right side of the camera, pulling back the curtain. It was dark outside, and the inside of the room was reflected in the glass. For an instant, you could see Akari in a neat room, holding up her phone, wearing indoor clothes.

She brought the camera closer to the window, and it showed the outside.

No one's there... or so I thought, but two yellow lights shone in the darkness. There was a squeaky voice, like a recording of someone speaking on fast-forward, and then the two points of light quickly approached the window.

The screen shook, pulling back from the window, and then the person recording the video's hand hurriedly grabbed the curtain, pulling it back.

Bam! There was another loud noise from the window... then silence.

After several seconds the perspective tilted, and the video came to an end.

“...Well?” Akari asked.

“That happens every night?”

“Yes. If I put up with it for a while, it goes quiet, though.”

I remembered the sounds I heard on the phone call with her yesterday. Could it be that the noises I had assumed came from her family were actually caused by this?

“Those yellow eyes are from a ninja cat?” Toriko asked as we rewound the video.

“Probably. I usually make a point of not opening the curtain, so I haven't gotten a proper look, but... I believe it's the same as the ones that tail me when it's light out.”

“You haven’t got them on film?”

“I’ve tried, but it never turns out right.”

Akari scrolled through the photos on her phone. There was a picture of a residential street with a black shadow in the corner, a blurry shot of something lurking across the road, a picture of a plain, ordinary cat on top of a slide in the park... Normally, if someone told me she was being pursued by ninja cats, and this was all she had to show you, I wouldn’t know what to do about it.

...Normally.

Come to think of it, in the original *Ninja Cats* story, the person reporting their experiences tried to take pictures, but they were only able to upload blurry images in the end.

“What made you want to help me? You didn’t have any intent of helping me before, right, Senpai?” Akari asked, mystified, as Toriko and I were both leaning in close to each other, looking at blurry photos. I answered her honestly.

“We got caught up in this. We don’t have a choice.”

“Caught up in it?”

“After hearing your story, I’ve had a clowder of cats stalking me, too. Haven’t spotted any ninja cats yet, though.”

After we left the tavern and went home the night before, the cats yowling outside my window made it real tough to get to sleep. Apparently it was the same at Toriko’s place. When I left the house this morning, I didn’t see any cats, so maybe they gave up and scattered.

“Wha?! That’s... my fault, then, right?”

“Yep.”

“Don’t worry, it’s no biggie. We’re used to it,” Toriko said arbitrarily.

“Wow... Have you been through a lot of experiences like this?”

“A fair few. Right, Sorawo?”

“...Well, yeah.”

Was that respect I detected on Akari’s face? Her eyes were sparkling. It made

me feel awkward, so I looked away.

Still, it was true. From an objective standpoint, we'd had more of "these sorts of experiences" than just about anyone. I don't know that there was any value in that, though.

Akari said she had gone to temples and shrines, but none of them had had any effect. It was little wonder. If it was a spirit, or a curse, something all too common like that, then there were offerings that could be made, purification rituals that could be performed. There were protocols for dealing with them. Whether those things actually existed or not, they could offer their services and advice on how to deal with the matter. But ninja cats? Who was going to take that seriously? She'd be laughed off, and that would be the end of it.

...Normally.

Hesitantly, I opened my mouth.

"You're right. If it's this sort of strange topic, I doubt there's many people more qualified to give you advice on it than we are."

There was a clearly bizarre situation unfolding, and existing religions had no way of dealing with it—that could be said to be typical of the aberrations reported on in true ghost stories and net lore. The Kunekune, the Time-space Man, Kisaragi Station... An exorcism wouldn't do anything to these aberrations. The stories of Hasshaku-sama and Kankandara had some element of traditional religion in them, but in those cases, they only barely sealed the aberration's actions—they didn't provide a fundamental solution.

Looking at it that way, *Ninja Cats* was actually the same. It wasn't scary in the least, though.

"Looks like you're in the mood for this now, huh?" said Toriko. I let out a sigh of resignation.

"Okay, I guess I'll have to. Let's take out some ninja cats."

"Okay."

"Th-Thank you!" Akari's face sparkled.

That said, though, I wasn't going to be able to point a gun at cats after all. I

didn't want to do it, and if anyone caught it on video, it'd go viral online...

No, I guess I'd be going to jail for violating the guns and swords law first, huh.

"...Here's hoping ninja cats aren't cute," I muttered to myself.

"Oh, yeah, the ninja cats, could you tell us exactly what they look like?" Toriko asked Akari.

"Oh! Let's see..." Akari said, then trailed off.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Erm... They look just like that."

When I looked in the direction she was pointing, I saw a small shadow standing on top of the counter.

A cat... That's what it looked like. A cat standing on two legs. It stood maybe fifty to sixty centimeters tall. It had gray fur that reminded me of a Russian Blue, and it wore tattered black clothes. In one hand, though I had no idea how, it was holding a katana-like weapon with a jagged blade.

While I was still dumbfounded, another revealed itself from beneath the counter. This one's fur was black. It wore a hooded cape, and it carried a vicious-looking weapon with scythe-like blades coming off of it in all directions. It was just like a throwing knife from Central Africa.

"...Ninja cats?!" Toriko and I cried out in unison.

Akari was right. I don't think you could call these anything but ninja cats.

The other customers and the staff had to notice, and they were going to make a scene... or so I thought, but at some point every single person had vanished from the busy cafe. The other tables had steaming coffee cups, plastic cups with condensation on the outside, and half-eaten chocolate croissants and french toast, as if everyone had just gotten up out of their seats right now and left them behind.

Meeeow! I was surprised by the number of yowling voices I suddenly heard, and when I looked out the window, there was nothing but cats. On the road, and on the sidewalk, cats, cats, cats.

On the other side of the cats, I could see a car had crashed into an electrical pole and stopped. Even though there'd been no sound from the crash. What broke through the front windshield and came out, lying on top of the bonnet, was clearly not human, but a creature that, with its sleek black body and short fins, looked like a deep sea fish. The cats perched on the roof of the car were peering down curiously at the fish as it flopped around.

"This is the man's world!" Toriko shouted.

This was the interstitial space between the surface and the other world where the Time-space Man appeared. It maintained the image of the surface world, but with disturbing elements scattered around, and might have been no less dangerous than the other world was during daytime. That was the sort of place we had been transported to without warning.

"Keep alert, they're coming!" Akari rose from her seat, raising her voice sharply. Immediately, the two ninja cats jumped down to the floor, rushing towards us.

Before I had time to respond, something obstructed my vision. It was a cream-colored square board—the plastic tray that had held our drinks. The moment I recognized it, something sharp tore through the tray and stopped just short of my nose.

"Whoa?!"

The tray fell to the floor as I rose from my seat in a panic. The African throwing knife was firmly embedded in it.

"You okay, Senpai?"

Unable to respond, I simply nodded. It was apparently Akari who had just protected me.

Toriko stood in front of me, her hand thrust into a tote bag. The two ninja cats must have sensed she was about to pull a gun on them, because they jumped backwards.

"To-Toriko. Hold on, wait." I hurriedly put a hand on Toriko's shoulder.

"Huh? What?"

“That’s not a good idea...!” I said in a low voice, and Toriko blinked, finally seeming to get it. Normally, we could whip our guns out right away, but we had Akari with us today.

“Well, what do you suggest then?”

“Uhhh, I dunno! Let’s just run for now.”

There were ninja cats between us and the exit to the cafe. When I looked deeper inside, in addition to the washroom, there was also a door that appeared to be for employees only. If we went there, maybe we could get outside through a window, or a back door?

“This way! Follow me!”

Without waiting for a response, I raced for the back of the cafe. Toriko and Akari followed. Once we had crossed the empty cafe and reached the door, there was a sign saying, “EnTRy By NoN-CaTS iS PrOHIBitED.” None of us were cats, but what did we care now? I opened the door, and there was an employees’ lounge. There were steel racks which held bags that no doubt belonged to the employees, hangers with uniforms, and a list of shifts posted on the wall. On the other side of the narrow space there was another door, this one leading outside, like I had thought.

Taking advantage of the lack of anyone to object, I brazenly walked in. Toriko and Akari were right behind me. Just as Akari, who was bringing up the rear, closed and locked it behind her, a jagged sword pierced through the plywood door.

“Whoa!” Akari raised her voice as she backed away. The sword made a sawing noise as it was pulled back out of the door. The glint of a cat’s eye shone on the other side of the hole.

“Yikes. They’re merciless, huh? That’s a ninja for you,” Toriko said, shaking her head in exasperation. “Akari, those things have been chasing you? For this whole month?”

“Yeah... They just tailed me at first, but things got more and more intense. For the past week, I’ve been running home.”

“I’m amazed you’re still alive.”

“Well, it was pretty dangerous.”

As I stared in disbelief at how calmly Akari was saying all this, our gazes met, and she smiled shyly. “I do karate, you see...”

“...”

Huh? Was that supposed to be an explanation?

“Oh, I see. Your moves were pretty incredible there. They went for Sorawo, and I got worried, but you had already reacted,” Toriko said, sounding impressed. I hadn’t even realized they were targeting me.

“Yeah, I do karate, so, you know...”

What’s with this girl?

No, I didn’t have time to think about that now.

There was a splintering sound, and an African throwing knife stabbed through the door. The ninja cat swung it several more times, like it was an axe, and chunks of wood went flying.

“Oh, crap. Oh, crap. We gotta get out of here,” I said, and the other two nodded.

I rushed to the back door, turned the knob, and opened it.

My feet were ready to fly out the door, but then came to a sudden stop.

“Whoa, don’t just stop—” Toriko, who ran into the back of me, said, her words trailing off.

Out the back door, the densely packed buildings rose up like steep cliffs. There was a metal catwalk the same width as the door frame that continued for about ten meters, and there was nothing beneath. At the bottom of that cliff, there seemed to be running water. The cliffs and buildings continued both to the left and the right, with similar bridges and catwalks going across the divide here and there.

The buildings across from us were filthy, like the back of a mixed residential building. It was crisscrossed with balconies, emergency exits, air conditioners, ladders, catwalks, and ducts. They were awfully small... not human size. The

catwalks were narrow, and the height of each individual floor was maybe half of what you would normally expect. The stairs were awfully steep, too. The footholds carved into that overhang wall must have been impassable for anyone who wasn't a rock climber.

"A cat... town?"

What Toriko said matched my own impression. After seeing all the cats out front earlier, I hadn't expected this town to be particularly normal, either, but this was beyond what I had imagined.

"Wh...What is this?" Akari was obviously surprised by all this. "I knew the area around me got kiiiind of weird whenever the ninja cats attacked, but this is a first."

So, basically, ninja cat attacks were accompanied by a shift into interstitial space? That was the same as the Time-space Man, wasn't it?

The door was being busted down behind us. This was no time to be staring off into space.

We had to move onward... No matter where that meant we would go.

"Let's go." Having made up my mind, I stepped onto the narrow bridge.

The rusty metal groaned beneath my feet. Though the catwalk had railings, they were low, only coming up to about my knees. They weren't going to stop me from falling. In fact, if I stumbled, there was a good chance I would trip over them, so they actually made it scarier.

I crossed the bridge at a jog, then looked for paths we could take. If we got down on our knees, it looked like there was a series of footholds going along the side of the cliff we could follow.

I cautiously followed the catwalk where one missed step might send me pitching head over heels to the bottom. The sun didn't reach the bottom of the cliffs, and it was dark, so consequently I ended up looking straight upwards. It felt like I was going to fall, and it was scary, but I couldn't convince myself to go inside the buildings. Looking in through the open windows, there were tatami rooms with small-sized bamboo mats, and hardwood floor corridors with channels for water laid in them. The ceilings were low, and if we entered

carelessly we might not be able to move around inside.

There was the creaking of a door from below. I looked down to see the two ninja cats coming out of the back door from earlier. They were looking towards us, as we crawled along the face of the cliff.

“They’re here already!” Akari shouted from the rear, telling me something I already knew.

The ninja cats looked at one another, then began crossing the catwalk.

We started climbing again, this time at a faster pace. The path wasn’t made for humans, making it a difficult athletic challenge. I was somewhat used to climbing up and down from my time exploring ruins, and Toriko was a stamina monster, so Akari was doing a good job just being able to keep up with us. Was this because she did karate, too? We were doing all this on a summer day, so I was already drenched with sweat. If I knew this was going to happen, I’d have worn clothes that were easier to move around in.

I felt like I was going to die, crawling a set of stairs so steep they felt like they were at a right angle, and then we came out into an open space halfway up the wall. It was a space on top of a concrete roof where we could walk around. The walls still continued upward, but we were at our limit... Even if we climbed further, it was only a matter of time before they caught up to us.

I heard the rustle of clothes closing in from below, and the two ninja cats scaled those stairs which had given us so much trouble in no time, and appeared again.

Having been cornered against the edge of the open space, the three of us glared at the ninjas through wheezing breaths.

Akari stepped forward with resolve. She put her bag down on the ground, then struck a karate-like fighting stance.

“Wait—”

“Please run away. I’ll buy time for the two of you, Senpai.”

“N-No, no, we can’t have you doing that...”

“No. It was my fault, getting you mixed up in this.”

This was all very brave of her, but no matter how good she was at karate, ninja cats with blades drawn and ready were still a terrifying threat. They had two ninjas on their side, while we had one karate fighter on ours... Wait, what was this? When I thought about it like this, I felt like I was going crazy.

While I was panicking, trying to find a way out of our predicament, Toriko said, "Sorawo, enough. I'm using this," and made the shape of a gun with her fingers.

"Y-You can't?!" I said, flustered.

"Come on, there's no other way to do this. We need to make this girl our accomplice, too."

"What do you mean, 'this'?"

"You keep quiet!" I shouted at Akari, then leaned in close to Toriko and quickly whispered, "She can't be our accomplice. No way. Stop it."

"Why?"

"Because!"

When I raised my voice in irritation, Toriko looked back at me, mystified.

Ugh, geez.

You're the one who said it.

Being accomplices is the closest kind of relationship in the world.

You! Said! It! First!

"...She can be a victim." I said, keeping my voice low. "A poor little victim who got dragged in by us. That, I can accept."

"I don't really get it... but sure."

Oblivious to how I was feeling, Toriko thrust her hand into her tote bag.

"Akari, I'm pretty sure this is going to be a surprise for you, so sorry."

Having said that, she drew the Makarov, pulled the slide to check the bullets, and then moved up. From beside her, I could see Akari's jaw drop.

"Huh...?"

I pulled my Makarov and moved forward, too.

“Sorry, Akari, but if you breathe a word of this to anyone, you’re going to pay for it.”

I tried to make my voice as intimidating as possible, but Akari didn’t seem to get it at all, so I immediately regretted it. I shouldn’t have done it.

Besides, if she did breathe a word to anyone, Toriko and I were the ones who were going to end up paying for it.

“Sorawo, are you already looking?”

“I-I’ll look now.” I focused on my right eye, like always.

The two cats standing on the edge of the roof... didn’t change. This was something we occasionally encountered in the other world, too. They were the kind that didn’t change between my right eye and my left.

“Urgh, they really are cats... I don’t wanna shoot...”

“Get it together! They’re coming to kill us!”

The two cats suddenly moved, as if Toriko’s voice had been their signal. They charged in at an incredible speed, holding their vicious blades at the ready. Their movements weren’t cute at all. They were filled with bloodlust.

Toriko opened fire. The gunshots echoed off the walls. The ninja cats dodged around, kicking off the wall to leap into the air. In the next instant, a jagged sword was buried in the ground where Toriko had been moments before.

“Scary!” Toriko said, then kept shooting. While I was distracted watching the one carrying the sword crouch low to avoid the point blank shot, then jump to the side to escape, the other one had run up right next to me before I could notice. In response to the African throwing knife swooping up towards me, I just narrowly managed to turn my gun on towards it. Nearly letting out a shriek of terror, I fired twice, but the bullets just bounced off of the concrete.

I’m done for! I stared at the approaching blade, unable to do anything more about it, when Akari’s foot sprang up from beside me.

“Ayyyyy!”

With a sharp kiai, she unleashed a forward kick. The knife-wielder jumped backwards, putting some distance between them. Her kiai surprised me, too, and I stumbled a bit. With the same gesture she used to lower her kicking leg, Akari took a step forward.

“You get back, Senpai!” she said, immediately launching into a low kick. It looked strong enough to break a baseball bat in half, but the ninja cat spun around and moved back to evade it.

“W...Wow! You kinda don’t need our help, huh?!” I blurted out, but Akari shook her head with a stern look on her face.

“It’s no good. Thrusts and kicks don’t work on these guys. They’re speedy little things, and even when I think I’ve got a hit, it never feels like it connected.”

Ohh... That made sense. These guys looked like they had a physical form, but they were a “phenomenon,” just like the Time-space Man. Even if I could catch them with my right eye, if bullets and karate were unable to hit them, it wouldn’t do us any good. On top of that, these guys would split up to distract us.

“Toriko, Akari, let’s get closer to the wall. If they catch us in between them, we’re in trouble.”

“Okay.”

“Got it!”

The three of us clumped together, moving slowly with the wall at our backs. The two ninjas closed in on us, too.

Then there was a change in how they moved. The two approached Akari’s bag, which she had left on the roof, and they peered at the opening to it. They stuck their heads inside, as if searching it.

“Sorawo, what are those things doing?”

“Don’t ask me. Hey, Akari, what’s in that bag?”

“Huh? Just normal stuff. My makeup bag, a battery for my phone—”

“Do you have raw fish in there, or something?”

“I don’t walk around with stuff like that!”

I remembered the voices Akari said she’d heard during the gathering of cats. Could it be that Akari had the “mark” those voices mentioned, and these guys were drawn to it?

“You really have no idea why they’d be out to get you? This one is sort of a cliché when it comes to real ghost stories, but I think it’s likely you abused cats when you were a kid.”

“Not a chance!” Akari said indignantly, and I observed her expression closely as she did. She didn’t look like she was lying to me, but did I really understand human emotions...? Whatever the case, there had to be something, whether she was aware of it or not. Some “mark” that the ninja cats were looking for.

I focused on the bag, but there was no change in my right eye’s vision. I decided to turn my right eye’s focus on Akari herself instead.

It had been a while since I did this to a person. The last time I’d done it was with the Time-space Man—in the ghost town in the other world, when I shifted Kozakura’s aspects, and turned her into a plant.

The reason I hadn’t used my right eye on a person since then was, honestly, because I was afraid to. Even if it happened under the special condition of being inside a glitch, it frightened me that I had been able to completely change a person’s form through my perception of them. If that sort of thing kept happening, I might eventually lose my ability to recognize people as people—that was the sense I got. More than that, though, when I asked Kozakura about it later, she said she was still conscious as a plant, and had a super scary experience in a place separate from my own perception.

I had been refraining from using my ability like this because of that, but it was about all I could think to do now. I had to do whatever I could, before we got diced up by those nasty-looking blades.

Having made up my mind, I caught Akari in my right eye, and gasped in surprise.

Akari’s body faintly glowed from the inside.

“What’s wrong, Sorawo?” Akari asked, having noticed the change in my

expression. Sighing, I explained it to her.

“There’s something inside your body. Something that gives off a silver light.”

“Is that...?”

Having noticed the exchange between us, the two ninja cats looked up from the bag. When our eyes met, they started walking towards us again.

“Akari, you haven’t been eating or drinking anything weird, have you?” Toriko asked, talking quickly.

“You didn’t snack on the offerings at a grave, or a cat’s food, did you?”

“Whaaaa? I haven’t done *aaaanything*.”

That sounded awfully insistent. The complete difference from the way she usually spoke caught me by surprise.

“*Whyyyyy* would you say that, Senpai? You’re making me *maaaad*. I don’t just eat things I pick up off the grou-ou-ou-ouuuu—” Her cloying tone of voice rapidly got muddled.

Every hair on my body raised as I came to an instinctive realization. She was going crazy. I could only think of one cause—I’d looked at her with my right eye!

“Toriko! Your left hand!”

When I said that, Toriko bit the glove on her left hand and pulled it off. Oh, she was so cool! But wait, I didn’t have time to admire her.

“What do I do with it?!”

“Stuff it inside Akari’s body!”

“Wh... Whaaaa?!”

Clearly, this wasn’t something she could just immediately say yes to. But there was no time to hesitate. The ninja cats were almost upon us, and Akari’s eyes were unfocused. If she went totally nuts, we’d have a karate monster on our hands.

I grabbed the hem of Akari’s T-shirt with one hand, taking Toriko’s hesitant hand with the other, and then pushed it against Akari’s belly, allowing no room for argument. Her translucent left hand buried itself inside Akari’s tight muscles

without any resistance. Akari let out a groan, and doubled over.

“Ewww, you made me touch something weird again,” Toriko cried out. From the look on her face, she really, really didn’t like it.

“Eeek! Blech! Huh? There’s something hard in here...”

“That’s it! Pull it out!”

“This is safe, right?!”

When Toriko pulled her fist out, Akari fell to her knees where she stood, and then vomited violently. Once I hurriedly took the focus of my right eye off her, Akari looked up at the two of us, gasping for breath, with tears in her eyes.

“Wh... Why’d you punch me in the stomach...?”

Oh, good, she was talking normally again.

“Any idea what this is?”

Toriko held her left hand in front of Akari’s face. There was a little doll on the palm of her hand. It was a simple one, made of ceramic. It had two pointed ears on its head. The round, curly thing must have been a tail. Where a face should have been, there was just a single green stone. That thing, wrapped in a silver halo, was unmistakably a foreign object from the other world.

“Oh! This is... my amulet! I thought I lost it.”

That was when the two ninja cats let out an intimidating hiss, then suddenly started to run towards us.

“Look out!”

I pushed Akari out of the way just in time as a sword and knife stabbed into the wall where we had been. Akari and Toriko both fell on their backs. The ninja cats pulled their blades from the wall, and were about to swing them down at the two who were unable to move.

“Toriko, pass!” I shouted, and Toriko swung her left hand. The ceramic figure slid along the roof, past the ninja cats’ feet. As I grabbed it and looked up, the two cats turned and their heads towards me.

“Th...This is it. This is what they were drawn to.”

When I said that, Akari's eyes went wide.

"How long have you had it?" I asked.

"Since last year. Someone gave it to me—"

Even as we were speaking, the ninja cats changed their target to me, and they started closing in.

"Sorawo, you can't hold onto that. Hurry up and let go of it," Toriko said, sounding concerned. She was now kneeling with her gun held at the ready.

For a moment, I thought about it. If I brought this back, I could get Kozakura to buy it off me, couldn't I? However, that would guarantee I got attacked by the ninja cats... Unfortunately, I'd have to turn it down.

"...Of course I'll let it go."

"What was that pause for?"

Hiss! The ninja cats pounced. I swung my arm, throwing the mud doll as hard as I could. Towards the cliff.

The ceramic doll flew, tracing a lazy parabola. It didn't fly nearly as far as I'd imagined, and my shoulder made a worrisome cracking noise, but it narrowly made it over the edge of the roof.

The ninja cats reacted quickly. They didn't so much as look at me after that. They raced sideways at an incredible speed, and then jumped off the roof and vanished.

When I looked over the edge, for an instant, I could see the green stone on the ceramic doll flicker as it reflected the sunlight. Two shadows pursued it with terrifying speed, jumping from building to building, as it fell to the base of the cliffs.

"...Whewwww." Released from all the tension, I slumped to the ground and sat where I was.

Toriko put her glove back on and approached, peering down at me. "There they go."

"Yeahhh, that was scary. I wish they'd cut it out with the physical stuff."

I didn't like mental attacks, either, but coming to murder me with knives had to be against the rules.

"H-Huh? That was what they were after? Why? Where was I even carrying that?" Akari was perplexed.

"You know, Akari-chan, maybe you were set up? By whoever made you carry that weird thing..."

"Huh? But it was an amulet..."

It seemed she had trouble accepting that. Well, not that it was surprising she would. We could only guess at their intentions, and there was no way to know if we had found the optimal answer.

If I explained we had pulled it out from inside her, that would only complicate things, so I opted not to mention it.

Still, it was shocking to me that my right eye had messed Akari up like that. The impression I got from Akari at that point was very similar to the disturbing elements in the streets of the interstitial space. If I used this eye on other people, it might change them into something from the other world.

I didn't want to imagine what would have happened if I'd kept looking at her like that. Maybe I was right, and I shouldn't use it on people lightly.

Well... Now the question was how to get back.

As I thought about it, putting my hands behind my back, I happened to look up and immediately froze solid.

Up above, there were countless cats sticking their heads out of the windows, looking down towards us. The very next moment, the cats all jumped out the windows, racing down the wall in an avalanche.

"Whaaaa?!"

I screamed as I, and Toriko, and Akari, were caught in the cat-avalanche.

The area around me was buried in soft fur, paws, tails, and noses. Enveloped in an unceasing flow of felines, we fell towards the abyss.

The sound of cars, the voices of people. The smell of exhaust, and of fast food. The sensory information of the surface world brought me back to my senses.

My vision was covered in thin branches. It seemed I was laying on my back, in a bush.

I immediately stowed my gun and stuck my face out of the bushes.

I instantly knew where I was: the public park in front of the art theater above the Metropolitan Exit. All those cats that had been around before were nowhere to be seen now.

I managed to crawl out of the bushes, snapping branches as I went, and noticed Toriko's hand sticking out of the bush next to me.

"Sorawo, help meeee."

"What're you doing?"

"My hair's all tangled..."

I took Toriko by the hand, and pulled. Her hair and clothes were covered in leaves.

"Whew, thanks. Where's Akari?"

"Over heeere."

I turned towards the voice and found Akari with her face thrust into the base of a bush.

"And what are you doing?" I asked.

"The stuff in my bag's scattered all over..." Akari replied.

"You want help?"

"I'm fine, if you can just wait a moment."

While Akari was retrieving her stuff, Toriko and I sat down at the edge of the bushes and waited.

"Ahhh, I'm going to jump every time I see a cat for a while. This is why I hate

weird stories that involve cats,” I said, sighing as I removed the leaves tangled in Toriko’s hair.

“Sorry. It’s all because I forced you to come out.”

“You said it. Well, it seems to have worked out in the end, so if I don’t have to worry about being stalked by cats any more, then whatever,” I said. Toriko got a mischievous smile on her face.

“Well then, how about I be your cat until the emotional scars have healed?”

“Huh?”

“Meeeeeow.”

Toriko looked at me with upturned eyes, making a gesture like that of a maneko-neko as she did.

“...”

“I’m not a scary cat, meow.”

“Co... Could you not do something so calculatingly cute?!” I barely forced myself to say, and Toriko tilted her head to the side in response.

“Why are you so angry, meow?”

“The way you’re ending your sentences!”

While I was still flipping out over it, Akari came over. “Senpai! Toriko-san! Thank you!”

I was at a loss for what to do when she bowed her head to us.

“Nah, it was no biggie. Treat us to a meal again sometime,” Toriko said, with no input from me. She had dropped the adorable meow at the end of her sentences, so I was narrowly able to maintain my sanity.

Come to think of it, normally, wouldn’t we receive some sort of compensation here? I should’ve said something beforehand, huh?

“You two were amazing! Are you always doing stuff like that?”

“Um, Akari, be sure that you don’t say—”

“I know, I won’t say anything. I mean, come on, I couldn’t tell anyone about

this nonsense.”

“Well, yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

But this girl did come to me, a total stranger, for advice about the ninja cats, so she had a record here. I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Sorry about the doll. I threw it away without asking first.”

“No, it’s fine. I’d never have imagined I was walking around carrying the cause of all my problems.”

“You said someone gave it to you... Who would give you something like that?”

It had been bothering me, so I asked her about it. I could only imagine that if someone had given Akari an item from the other world to walk around with, there must have had some intent—malicious intent, to be specific—behind that action.

“It was the tutor who was teaching me last year. She said it was an amulet that would help me get through my entrance exams, so I took good care of it.”

“Hmm... What was she like? Do you have her contact information?”

“Yeah, about that. I haven’t been able to get in touch with her for some time now. Maybe since around the start of the new year? We’ve been out of contact for more than half a year now,” Akari said sadly, lowering her eyes. “Her name was Uruma-sensei.”

Toriko’s eyes widened in shock. She looked like she’d been struck by lightning. “Uruma... Satsuki Uruma?”

“Huh? Yeah, that’s right. Do you know her, too?” Akari asked, sounding baffled, but Toriko did not reply.

Satsuki Uruma.

Toriko’s “friend” who vanished in the other world. The person Toriko adored, and who she was still risking her life to search for.

I never expected to hear her name from Akari when I first met her. I was shocked, of course, but how much larger was the impact on Toriko?

Judging by her earlier reaction, she had been completely unaware that Satsuki-san was seeing other people.

I thought she'd grill Akari for more details, but contrary to my expectations, Toriko got very quiet and went home alone.

If I considered what both of them had told me, the period when Satsuki Uruma was tutoring Akari Seto and the period when she told Toriko about the other world and they were exploring it together overlapped. I'm sure Toriko had always believed she was Satsuki Uruma's greatest confidant, yet here was proof she had been seeing this other girl without her knowledge. Any excuse that it was simply another tutoring job was irrelevant, because Toriko was discovered by Satsuki Uruma when she came to tutor her, and "scouted" as a companion for exploring the other world.

Poor Toriko. I felt like I could sort of understand why she went home without saying anything.

I'm sure Toriko would have wanted any information that might be linked to Satsuki-san's disappearance, but she didn't want to hear it from Akari. She might come to terms with her feelings eventually, but it wasn't going to happen right away. Even I, who had been accused of lacking human emotions, could see that much.

That's why, the next day, when I sent her a message asking to continue our hunt for a gate, I was unsurprised that her reply was just a stamp that said she was resting because she felt unwell.

It's okay, Toriko, you rest up. I understand.

Filled with compassion, I got ready, and headed out on the quest to discover a gate on my own.

Though, before that—lest I forget, I was going to turn that seashell-shaped foreign object over to Kozakura first. Kozakura wouldn't cheap out on me, but she needed to prepare before she could trade it for cash; to investigate the object, and to get the cash ready.

I got off at Shakujii-kouen Station on the Seibu Line. After passing through the shopping area, I descended the hill towards the park area and walked into the

residential district. The route was already familiar to me.

I was in the middle of thinking, *It'd be so convenient if there were a gate around here*, as I looked down a hazy road with my right eye. I'd looked here yesterday, too, but just to be safe...

No, it wasn't that easy. My eyes were just tired, and I made it to Kozakura's house easily. I entered the gate, and winced when I saw the AP-1 still sitting there.

Wow, I screwed up. It's no wonder Kozakura was upset. Seriously, how did I plan to bring it to the other world from here?

While I was getting exasperated with myself, I looked past the AP-1.

There was a gate there.

"...Whuh?" I stopped, and blinked. There was no doubt about it: that was a gate.

In front of the door to Kozakura's house, in a space about three meters high, and three meters across, was a shimmering silver light.

Why? What was this doing here?

"Ah!" I cried out as the reason occurred to me.

Right. Now that I thought about it, hadn't a gate opened here before? It was when we opened the door to deal with the three women. A giant face had appeared, and Kozakura and I had been forcibly dragged into the other world. Thinking about it, I had never consciously chosen to use my right eye here before. The gate had remained all this time.

That was super convenient for me, but... When Kozakura found out, she was gonna flip...

"What're you doing, standing there?" Kozakura called out to me as I was staring vacantly at the gate, and I snapped back to my senses.

Kozakura, who came out the front door wearing sandals, looked out at me dubiously from the shadow of the eaves.

"Oh, hey..." I awkwardly greeted her, which caused Kozakura to realize

something was up.

“Ahh... Are you worried about how I yelled at you last time? Well, I think I may have said a bit too much. Here I was, cooped up by myself, but strange things kept happening one after another, and I was irritated. Sorry.”

“O-Oh, no.”

“Did you find a gate? No, there’s no way you could have so quickly, right?”

“I found a gate... I did, but...”

“Huh? You did? You work fast. I’m seeing you in a whole new light now.”

“Hahah... It’s nothing to praise me for, really...”

My voice was growing thinner and thinner.

“Well, come in, it’s hot out here. Do you want ice cream?”

Seen through the silver haze in front of her door, Kozakura’s good-natured smile seemed to sparkle. I walked towards her with heavy steps, wondering how I was going to break the news to her.

File 8: Little Bird in a Box

1

“Karateka’s been insufferable since then,” I grumbled between sips of red wine, causing Toriko, who was on the other side of the table from me, to raise an eyebrow.

“Karateka?”

“That girl, the one who said she does karate...”

We were at a wine bar near the Junkudo in Ikebukuro. It was the middle of the week, but the dimly lit establishment was filled with customers. In one corner of a place where there were young couples having a lively time, we were having a quiet after-party of our own.

“Err, her name was Akari Seto, right?”

“Wow. You’ve got a good memory, huh. I’d already forgotten.”

“That’s pretty awful of you.”

“Whatever, she’s Karateka to me.”

Our last expedition to the other world... or rather, that interstitial space between the surface world and the other world, was with my kouhai at university, Akari. Akari Seto, who did karate. I received a request from her, and after that we wandered into a town of cats where we ended up on the run from ninja cats. Meeeeowch.

“I mean, she was asking me stuff like, ‘Senpai, do you have spirit sense?!’ from the very beginning, so I kind of had a hunch, but it seems she was interested in this kind of stuff all along. Ever since then, she calls me all the time, and shows up whenever I go to the cafeteria. I’m sick of having her bug me all the time.”

“Sounds like she’s taken a liking to you. Why not remember her name, at

least?”

“I wouldn’t mind a dog or cat following me around, but when it’s a person, it’s just a hassle to deal with.”

“Hmm. Do you remember my name?”

“Of course I do.”

“Try and say it?”

“...Nishina-san.”

“Oh, my. It feels a little fresh to hear it like that, Kamikoshi-san.”

There was a wooden plate covered with raw ham in front of us, and Toriko picked up a slice with her translucent fingers. She would wear gloves, even while eating, in places where people might see her, but when we had a seat in the back like this, or a private room, she often took them off.

I called them translucent, but they weren’t completely invisible. The way they shone in the surrounding light made it apparent there were fingers there. Though, if you stared at them hard enough, the outline became vague, and it felt like they had dissolved into the air.

As I watched her mystical left hand taking a piece of ham and carrying it to her mouth, it made me worry my own feet might vanish like that.

“...How about using a fork?”

“Is this bad manners?”

Toriko turned her chin upwards, swallowing the meat, then licking her fingers.

“You’re like an animal.”

“Am I, meow?”

“You like punctuating your sentences with a meow?”

“I like the funny face you make when I do it.”

“You’re a nasty one, Nishina-san.”

We both tilted our glasses back. This bubbly red wine, which we had been told went well with raw ham and salami, was fruity, and didn’t have a high

alcohol content, so it went down easy. It almost wasn't strong enough.

"You could've brought Karateka-chan along today."

"Are you serious?"

"The more the merrier, you know?"

"No way... I could never relax with her around." I scowled, and Toriko guffawed.

"Is she following you around that doggedly?"

"It turns out Karateka lives pretty close to my place. I mean, if you think about it, we're going to the same university, so that's not that strange, though. She'll come up to me, going 'Senpai, Senpai,' being all friendly, and since she knows I've got a gun, I can't be too rude to her."

"Heehee."

Here I was, telling her my problems seriously, and Toriko went and chuckled.

"Is something funny?"

"I was just thinking how you've changed. You've got a friend other than me now!"

"She... She's not my friend, okay?! Who'd be friends with *that*!"

Toriko's eyes narrowed as I protested. Like she was watching me warmly...

Huh? What is this? I'm being misunderstood here, aren't I?

Feeling a pressure I didn't quite understand, I rejected what Toriko was saying. "Listen, this isn't me being a tsundere, or anything like that. I'm saying it because I'm genuinely irritated."

"Where's the harm? You don't have to be so cold. It's good to have someone who adores you."

"Whoa, let me stop you right there. That's what people say to stalking victims when they just don't get it."

"Really? Because this is the first I've heard you gripe about another person, or give them a nickname."

“Sure, maybe that’s true, but let me gripe, at least!”

“Listening to people complain isn’t something I’m all that good at, you know?” Toriko said with a smug look on her face, and I glared at her.

Toriko pretended not to notice the look I gave her, snatching up another slice of salami with her fingers.

What was it? Something felt different from usual.

Oh, yeah! Normally, she ordered more than we could eat at the very beginning, but this time she was being uncharacteristically restrained. She hadn’t ordered more than the initial wine and the ham and salami plate.

“Want to order more?” I asked.

“Mmm. I’ll leave it up to you.”

...Yeah, something was weird.

I could imagine the reason: Toriko had Satsuki-san on her mind.

I hadn’t heard the name Satsuki Uruma from Toriko in a while. I thought she might have gotten over her, but that wasn’t it. Unexpectedly hearing Satsuki’s name come out of Akari’s mouth must have bothered her. I mean, she didn’t leave her house at all for a while after our last expedition. Toriko’s heart was held captive by her still missing “friend.”

Suddenly concerned, I asked, “Hey, Toriko... You aren’t going to go off on your own again, like before, right?”

Toriko looked up at me in surprise. “Whaaaat? Where’s this coming from, out of nowhere?”

When I stared back at her, Toriko put on an insincere smile, then shook her head.

“It’s okay, I get it. I won’t do that ever again. It’s fine.”

Her tone was less than reassuring.

I was reminded of about a month ago, after we escaped from the beach in the other world, and we came out on Ishigaki Island. That time, I spotted a figure that looked like Satsuki-san on the other side of the gate. Even though Toriko,

who would want to know that more than anyone, was right beside me at the time, I couldn't bring myself to tell her. Ever since, I had been dragging things out, unable to say it, up until now.

Should I tell her? Is the fact that I saw her precious friend, the one she adores so much she would risk her own life for her without question, something I ought to tell her?

I thought about it as I watched Toriko empty her glass, a look on her face like she had left half her heart someplace else.

...Screw that. No way am I telling her.

For one thing, she was on that monster-infested beach, so that thing had to be some monster from the other side that just looked like Satsuki-san. That's how it was with the windmill woman. Even if she looked human in my right eye, I couldn't let my guard down. I had already seen proof that some of these guys didn't change between my left and right vision.

Yeah, I'm better off not saying anything. I need Toriko to forget all about Satsuki-san.

Damn Akari Seto... she just had to open her big mouth.

Karateka is good enough for her after all.

2

The next day, we were in Kozakura's yard, preparing for an expedition. It was the first trial run for the agricultural machine I had bought while drunk out of my mind on Ishigaki Island, Tobacco Control Work Vehicle AP-1.

"I put in the gasoline, Sorawo." Toriko put a cap on the fuel tank and looked up.

"Okay. I'll give it a go."

Following the manual, I started the engine. This was my first time, so I didn't know what I was doing. I don't know how many minutes I struggled with it for, but eventually there was a good vroom from the engine, and it started up.

“I did it!”

“Congrats!”

As we celebrated, Kozakura was watching us from the doorway, an unamused look on her face.

Having learned that there was a gate on her front doorstep, of all places, Kozakura was pretty disappointed, as you might expect. I thought she would flip out more, but it seems shock won out over anger. When I was hesitantly making my report to her, she was like a machine stuck on repeat, just saying, “Are you serious?” “Why is this happening?” and “It’s just not fair,” over and over. Then, after chasing me out of her house, she didn’t answer her phone for days.

When I sat in the seat on the right, Toriko put her butt down in the seat on the left without another word. The body of the vehicle was shaped like a square arch, and behind it were two seats, with me on the right, and Toriko on the left. Normally, the ridge of a tobacco field was supposed to go under that arch as we drove, so there was a gap of just under a meter between us.

“Try making it go, Sorawo.”

“Hold on a sec... Is this it?”

When I moved both the left and right treads with levers at the same time, the AP-1 began slowly moving forward. I pulled the levers back, and it reversed. If I moved just one, it turned. Simple. The speed was relaxed, too, so even I could drive it.

“This is top speed? Talk about leisurely.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, it was originally a work vehicle used in the fields.”

In fact, the catalog specs gave it a top speed of just 3 kilometers per hour. It was faster to walk. The benefit to this was we didn’t have to.

“Isn’t this space in the center kind of a waste?” Toriko said dubiously after leaning in and looking at the gap in the middle of the vehicle’s body.

“Yeah. How about we buy hooks or something, and hang our luggage there?”

There was a shelf we could place things on up top, and the tops of the left and

right treads were empty, too. Where would be the most convenient spot for a rifle? Starting to get excited, I looked all over the vehicle.

The only thing we had loaded on it this time was a blue sheet, which we could use to cover it when we were on the other side, but the AP-1 was originally intended to carry things like tobacco seedlings, tanks of agricultural chemicals, and harvested tobacco. Despite its appearance, it was tougher than you might think. That AP in its name, which stood for All Purpose, was there for a reason, and it looked like we were going to be able to put it to a variety of uses. Though, I'm sure the people who designed it never imagined it would be used for expeditions into an unfamiliar world like this.

We took it for a spin around the yard which was overgrown with weeds, then brought it back to the front door. Was this enough of a test drive? I stopped the AP-1 for a moment, and looked down at Kozakura's sour face from on top of the vehicle.

"Okay, we're heading out now."

"I'm amazed you two can go there so lightheartedly..." Kozakura said in exasperation.

"We're just going to leave this over there this time. We'll be right back."

"That line's a death flag if I ever heard one."

"What, so you don't mind me leaving this here forever?"

"Of course I mind."

"I don't think there's any reason you should be complaining then, is there?"

"Kozakura's concerned for us, Sorawo," Toriko said. Kozakura's face got even more sour.

"Oh, I'm concerned... Yeah, there really is something wrong with the two of you. How can you go into that scary place so willingly?"

When Toriko and I looked at one another, Kozakura let out a deep sigh.

"Oh, never mind. It's too late for this. Don't go bringing anything weird back with you. This is my house, after all..."

I couldn't blame Kozakura for being unenthusiastic. She was now able to go out her front door and, with a zero-minute walk, encounter the risk of being dragged into the other world.

From what I was able to figure out investigating it with Toriko, the gate here was usually closed, and we couldn't just go through it as is.

Basically, as long as Toriko didn't force it open with her left hand, it ought to be safe, but... the first time this gate opened was when the three women appeared. There was no telling when that might happen again, and monsters from the other world would ring Kozakura's doorbell.

In fact, the results of our investigation had done little to reassure Kozakura. Well, I just hoped that Ponpoko (her ceramic raccoon) could help distract her from her fears, and keep her spirits up. I mean, having a stable gate right here like this was super convenient for me and Toriko...

For now, the location of the gate was marked with some gardening poles. The green-colored poles were thrust into the ground three meters apart. I thought it might be nice if we planted some morning glories while we were at it, but it wasn't in my interest to risk getting Kozakura angry by saying something I didn't have to, so I kept quiet.

"Sorawo, are we good to go?"

"Should be. Could you get the gate?"

"Okay."

Toriko got down from her seat, standing in front of the two poles. While she was doing that, I adjusted the direction of the AP-1, making it face the front of the gate. On the other side of the poles, Kozakura sullenly watched over us.

"All right... Here I go." Toriko took off her left glove, slowly bringing the tips of her fingers towards the area between the two poles.

In my right eye, it looked like the space warped as Toriko touched it. Her clear fingers stroked a surface that looked both like a silky fabric and smooth skin.

Her fingers hesitated, pulled away for a moment, then approached again, slightly bolder in their probing than before. Her hand stopped, and the five

fingers grasped the membrane that separated the two worlds. Her arm swung quickly, like she was pulling back a curtain, and then, the moment after, a gate opened right there.

Three meters wide, three meters high. There, between the poles, almost a perfect square had been cut out of space. On the other side of the open gate was a windswept green meadow.

“H-Hey... Are you all right?”

I heard Kozakura’s surprised voice, so I leaned over to look at her past the pole, and her eyes bugged out in surprise.

“Eww, gross!”

“What did you say? How rude.”

“No... I had lost sight of you two from here. Now all I can see is your disembodied head sticking out past the pole.”

Oh, that made sense. Kozakura couldn’t see the gate from her side, so did that mean she couldn’t see what was on the other side of the gate, too?

“Hey, is this good?” Toriko turned back and asked me. I nodded.

“Okay. I’m going to drive forward, so be careful.”

I stuck my head out around the edge of the pole one more time and waved. Kozakura made a disgusted face as she saw us off.

Driving the AP-1 forward, the lukewarm wind of the other world’s plains brushed my cheeks. The wind grew stronger as the small treads rolled forward, crushing the weeds and pebbles beneath them. The moment we passed through the gate, my field of vision opened up, and a grassy plain spread out around me. Continuing forward, both seats passed the poles, and the vehicle fully entered the other world.

Toriko called out from behind me.

“Sorawo! Can I close this?”

“Ah! Hold on, wait!”

I hurriedly stopped the AP-1 and got down from the vehicle. I wanted

something marking the location of the gate not just on the surface side, but on the other side, too. I fetched a gardening pole from the roof rack, looked to the side of the gate—and was gobsmacked. In the middle of the plains, there were already two poles standing there.

...Two aged totem poles.

Not proper ones, like Native Americans might have built. There was no style to the vertical column of faces; they were like the crude drawings of a child. The surface of the wood was falling apart, as if it had been exposed to wind and rain, and what paint remained on it was faded.

“Why...?”

These things weren’t here the last time I came to this place. While I was blinking, Toriko came through the gate, still holding onto the space, and said, “Do you think when we planted the poles on the surface, these things grew up on this side? With the other gates, there’s always been something or other standing on this side, hasn’t there?”

True... It was hard to imagine someone on this side “constructed” the skeletal building on the other side of Jinbouchou’s elevator. Maybe, when the surface and the other side were connected, some geographical feature that looked right for a gate would be automatically generated in the other world.

“Hey, we’re good now, right? Is it okay if I close it?”

“Oh, sorry. Go ahead.”

Toriko, who had been holding the gate open until now, opened her left hand. The pleat in space rippled back into place, and the gate was closed. Kozakura’s yard, which we had been able to see through the window in space, vanished.

The two of us stood side-by-side, looking out over the silent plains. It was a fine day in the other world. Bathed in the heavy sunshine, the green of the grass looked pale. There was a small hill to the east of the gate. When Kozakura and I spontaneously entered the other world, we had climbed it to get the lay of the land.

Toriko drew her Makarov and shifted the slide, checking her bullets before returning it. We had both come lightly equipped, without our assault rifles. Like

I had told Kozakura, our goal for today was simply to transport the AP-1.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anything around, so where do we park it?” Toriko asked.

“I guess just wherever for now, and we’ll put the sheet over it. I wish we had a garage, though...”

“Want to build a shed?”

“You think we could manage with just the two of us?”

“I dunno. Should we get Karateka-chan to help?”

I got back in my seat without answering that one. I started the engine back up, and began driving the AP-1 towards the hill.

“Huh? Hold on, wait up!” Toriko cried, hopping aboard the AP-1 which had started to move.

“...That’s dangerous.”

“Well, I thought you were gonna leave me behind.”

Toriko peered at my face from the side, but I didn’t look her in the eye.

The conversation died and stayed that way as the AP-1 slowly crawled up the hill. We reached the summit, and the marshland that was on the other side of the hill came into view.

I stopped the AP-1, and Toriko got off. Shading her eyes with her hands, she looked around the area.

“Oh! That’s the skeletal building that comes from Jinbouchou? Hmm, so that’s how it’s connected.”

“You shouldn’t look for too long. There’s Kunekunes in that waterlogged patch of grass down there.”

“Then, the place I first met you is... Over there, maybe?”

Those words caught my attention, and I looked up despite myself.

Toriko turned around, as if she’d known I would, and our eyes met. *Come over here*, she beckoned me. I got down from my seat, feeling somewhat less than

amused, and trod over the grass to where Toriko was.

“Look. It’s around there, where the water stops, right?”

“I couldn’t say. It’s not like there were any landmarks.”

“There’s a place where the grass breaks, isn’t there? I think that’s the footpath where the corpse was. It must’ve been near there.”

“Hmm...?”

I squinted, still not convinced. “Remind me, how long has it been since the two of us first met again?” Toriko asked.

“It was in May, so... It hasn’t even been three months.”

I surprised myself, saying that. Three months? That couldn’t be right, could it?

“Just three months, huh...” Toriko’s whisper sounded bewildered, too.

“Somehow, it feels like I’ve been with you way longer, Sorawo. It’s weird.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Starting to feel a little uneasy, I looked at Toriko. Her downcast eyes made her look unusually sorrowful.

“...Sorawo, why is it you come along with me anyway?”

“Huh?”

“You’re not even remotely interested in Satsuki, right? Yet you’re willing to come to this dangerous place with me, a person you didn’t meet all that long ago. Why is that?”

You gonna ask me that now, after all the close brushes with death we’ve been through together?

“...Well, I want to explore, too. I was drawn to the other world even before I met you, after all,” I said, and then, mumbling, added: “Besides, you know, we’re f... friends, and all.”

“Thanks. But...”

But? But what?

“I wonder if it’s okay for me to monopolize your attention like this.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking about it ever since last time, with the cats. You seem to get along with Kozakura, and Akari, too. You worked hard to rescue the U.S. forces, and you were super high-strung when we were drinking in Naha. Normally, you’d interact with all sorts of other people, and it would expand your world, but if you’re with me, I worry I’d be stealing that potential from you.”

“No, that’s not true... I’m shy, so, if I’m being honest, I don’t want my world expanded too much.”

“Hmm, that’s definitely a real waste,” Toriko said, cutting me off. “I was that way a long time ago. For all this time, since I first met Satsuki, she was all that was important to me, you see. I had no interest in anyone else.”

“Hmm. Well, well.”

I gave a lazy response, but then it occurred to me.

“What about Kozakura-san? When did you get to know her?”

“After Satsuki disappeared. You know how Kozakura always is, right? She’s easy to get along with without having to keep up pretenses, so we became friends as we kept in contact. I had met her before then, too, but neither of us was interested in the other.”

As I listened, I gradually started to feel lonely. If I had met Toriko back then, it’s questionable whether she would have even noticed me.

“When Satsuki vanished, honestly, I had no idea what to do anymore. I was suddenly all alone—it was terrifying. It still is. Even though you and Kozakura are there for me. I’ve been frightened all this time, continually searching for Satsuki.”

Toriko hesitated for a bit before she continued. “Hey, Sorawo. Listen, if I were to vanish—”

“Stop it. We had a promise.”

“I won’t up and disappear on my own. But wandering around in this dangerous place, we never know what might happen.”

You're not being fair, I thought. She was bringing up something we both knew, something we had an unspoken understanding about.

The wind formed ripples on the water in the marsh below. Even I couldn't tell if there were glitches beneath the water from here.

As I was unable to speak, Toriko continued. "If I were to disappear, Sorawo, I worry you might end up like me. I'm the one who dragged you into searching for Satsuki, and I do sort of feel responsible for it. Sure, you may be shy, but I've seen you can talk to people... I think it would be good if you made other friends, too, you know?"

"I don't need them."

"The way things are going, I'm going to ruin your life, then leave it that way. I don't want that."

No. Toriko, you're wrong.

I wanted to argue back, but my unreliable head was spinning uselessly, and not one clever retort came to me.

Toriko suddenly smiled, then turned around and started walking.

"Shall we? We're leaving the car and heading back, right? I'm sure Kozakura's worried."

"Oh... Yeah."

As Toriko walked back towards the AP-1, all I could do was follow her with my eyes, still unable to think of anything.

3

We passed between the totem poles and returned to the surface world. Compared to the somewhat blurry sunlight of the other world, the sunlight in the surface world was unrelenting, and it cast thick shadows on the ground. My shadow was chasing after Toriko's shadow, which was in front of me; the fact that we weren't side-by-side made me feel lonely.

When I looked up, there was a black car stopped in the yard. It was clearly a

luxury car, and the body was polished to the point where you could probably see your face reflected in it.

I panicked, thinking that someone might have seen us come out of the gate, but when we approached it became apparent there was no one inside the vehicle.

“She’s got a guest,” Toriko murmured.

“The car looks expensive. Think they’re with the yakuza?” I said without any real thought.

“I think it’s pretty childish that you immediately associated an expensive car with the yakuza,” Toriko said plainly.

I had no retort.

“F-Fine, I’m sure I’m just a child.”

“That response is childish, too.”

“Urgh...”

Toriko’s sure in a bullying mood today...

While I was thinking about it, Toriko pulled out her smartphone, and started dialing.

“Oh, hey? We’re back, but I see you’ve got a visitor. Should we stay out of the house? ...Oh, sure. Okay. Gotcha. Yeah, I know. Later.” Toriko hung up, then turned to me. “She says we can come in. Just make sure we put our guns away.”

“Oh... I see.”

I took off the holster with the Makarov still in it, and stuffed it in my bag before we headed towards the house.

When we opened the door, a large pair of black shoes had been left at the entrance. Men’s shoes. Toriko and I looked at each other before taking off our own shoes and going inside. We could hear Kozakura’s voice from the doorway on the left side of the hall.

“We’re over here. Come on in.”

The door was always closed, so I hadn’t seen the inside of this particular room

before. I peered in through the open door, seeing that it was a reception room with a carpet. Kozakura and an unfamiliar man were sitting across from one another at a set of sofas with a table in the middle.

The man turned towards us, stood, and bowed.

“I apologize for the intrusion.”

He was a tall man with long arms and legs. He had a thin face with sunken cheeks, and his long, curly hair was neatly set in place. His tailored three-piece suit looked expensive. He looked like he might be in his thirties, but the mature way in which he carried himself made it hard to be sure of his age.

“Oh, uh, hey...”

“Hello.”

I gave a bewildered nod of my head, while Toriko’s greeting was more neutral.

“Kozakura, who is this...?” I asked.

“I told you before, didn’t I? There’s a civilian organization that researches the other world. He’s from there.”

Following Kozakura’s introduction, the man produced a business card.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. You are Kamikoshi-sama and Nishina-sama, I believe? I have heard of you. I am Migiwa of the DS Lab.”

The card I was handed read: General Incorporated Foundation — DS Research Encouragement Association — Director — Ichirou Migiwa.

“Ohh, then the person who’s been buying the foreign objects we bring back from the other world is...”

“Yes, that is correct. I have come here today to pick up another,” Migiwa said, indicating the briefcase on the table.

“It’s the infinite seashell you brought in earlier, Sorawo-chan. Aren’t you glad? You can eat well now,” Kozakura said teasingly. There was a large paper bag at her feet. It didn’t look like a bunch of sweets she was going to give us to take back home... Maybe it was a bundle of bills? Kozakura always paid me in cash,

after all.

“I am told that you two have traveled to the UBL and returned alive several times now. It is an honor to meet you.”

“Uh, thanks.” I gave a vague response, not sure what that was an abbreviation for.

“What’s UBL mean?” Toriko asked.

“Ultrablue Landscape—I believe you two call it the other world.”

A chill ran down my spine. Ultrablue. There was no way he wasn’t referring to that blue light.

“Okay, what’s DS short for?”

It took Migiwa a moment before he answered Toriko’s question this time.

“...Dark Science.”

“Dark Science?!” I couldn’t help but loudly parrot back. The Dark Science Research Encouragement Association? What was that supposed to be?

Toriko and I looked at one another. I was relieved to find she was just as confused as I was. If I was asked whether it sounded cool or not, I’m not sure what I would have answered.

Migiwa smiled wryly as he continued. “I know it has a slightly sinister ring to it. That was simply the naming sense of the times when it was founded, you see... It seems ‘dark science’ was meant to refer to the unknown areas of science.”

“When was it founded?”

“In the early nineties. Nowadays you might call it marginal science, trans-science, or non-traditional science.”

Honestly, none of those sounded all that different to me.

I grew wary. This guy wasn’t with a cult, was he? The moment someone started talking about “unknown fields of science,” you could more or less guarantee it was pseudoscience, and the large amounts of cash changing hands supported the idea there was something shady going on.

“Does Satsuki belong to the association, too?” Toriko asked in a low voice.

Migiwa nodded. “Yes. Satsuki Uruma-san is a guest researcher at the DS Lab. She headed into the other world, and brought back more objects than anyone had before. It is disappointing that she has vanished, and I am worried about her, too.” he said quietly. Toriko leaned in.

“I have a request. Could you take me to your lab? I want to find a hint about where Satsuki went.”

Seriously...?

Seeing the way that Toriko looked at Miguiwa, as if clinging to him in desperation... I felt bitter.

Get it together, Toriko. What if this guy's a cultist? Don't you have any sense of danger? You'll do anything to search for Satsuki-san?

“Well...”

Migiwa was hesitant, but Toriko kept pushing. “I didn't find out Satsuki was working at a lab until just recently. Is there anything you can tell me, no matter how small?”

In a moment of realization, I raised my hand. The way things were going, Toriko was going to go there alone if she had to. “M-Me, too! I'll go to the lab, too!” I cried out, my voice going shrill, and Toriko turned to look at me.

“You sure?”

“You bet I am.”

That I was thinking, *Don't ask me that*, was apparent from my tone.

“Why are you mad?”

“I'm not mad.”

“...I guess I have no choice. I'll go, too.”

It was my turn to be surprised upon hearing that. Toriko looked shocked, too.

Even though she'd volunteered on her own, Kozakura let out a weary sigh. “I can't just hand over two idiots and pretend that whatever happens isn't my problem. I'll be coming along as a chaperone. All right?”

That last question was directed at Migiwa. “You are sure about this?”

Migiwa still seemed undecided, but Kozakura nodded. “Yeah. Let them see... where encounters of the fourth kind lead.”

There was a determination in Kozakura’s voice. Migiwa finally nodded, then turned back to Toriko and me. “Very well. I should have been the one to extend the invitation. Pardon my lack of consideration.”

“So, it’s okay?” Toriko asked.

“Yes. I would ask you all to accompany me.” Migiwa gave us a polite bow. Stealing a sidelong glance at Toriko as she nodded, her lips drawn taut, I couldn’t suppress a feeling of unease.

4

“Huh, is that a new car?” Kozakura said the moment we were outside.

“It is. A Mercedes AMG.”

“The S-class, right? You’re making bank.”

“It’s a company car.”

“It’s to your taste, though. You came here without a driver, too.”

That exchange between Kozakura and Migiwa was very frank. I could tell they had known each other for a while. Suddenly, a doubt arose in my mind. If the DS Lab was a cult, might Kozakura, who was close to Migiwa, be a follower...?

No, no. I shook my head, trying to dispel the irrational fear. It had been less than three months since I had first met Kozakura, but I had never detected that unique air of giddy restlessness that cultists had from this perpetual sourpuss.

When I realized I wanted to believe in Kozakura, I was perplexed. In my high school years, just the possibility of it would have been enough for me to distance myself.

Migiwa looked down at Kozakura with a smile. “I doubt the opportunity arises often, so would you like to try driving it?”

“You sure?”

“This is your driving we are talking about. I trust you.”

Migiwa pointed the smart key at the car to unlock it, then passed the key to Kozakura. She walked around to the driver’s seat, then cheerfully got in.

“Please, you two get in as well,” Migiwa urged us, and we got into the back seat. The seats were a whitish color, and felt so expensive as to be intimidating. Even the drink holder between the left and right seat seemed to sparkle with opulence.

“Wow, this sure is something, huh. Hey, Kozkaura, how much do you figure this car cost?” Toriko asked as she touched it all over.

“Hmm, twenty million yen?”

“T-Twenty...” As I gulped despite myself, Toriko started laughing.

“If we bring back, like, twenty foreign objects from the other world, we could buy one!”

“...You sure are optimistic, huh, Toriko.”

Migiwa got into the passenger seat and closed the door. When he turned back and looked at us over the seat, he spotted the large backpacks we were carrying.

“Would you like to put your luggage in the trunk?”

“We’re fine like this,” I said. Toriko nodded in agreement. The backpacks contained all the equipment we didn’t leave with the AP-1 earlier, as well as a change of clothes. It was a full set of equipment for exploring—which included a Makarov, and a disassembled assault rifle.

“You buckled up? We’re going,” said Kozakura, her seat leaned super far forward. It must have been hard for her to drive with her short stature, but unlike usual, she looked like she was having fun.

When the engine started, I felt an impressive vibration through my butt.

“Mmph,” Kozakura let out a weird noise as she stepped on the accelerator. The car rolled across the gravel, out of the yard, and onto the road, then began

driving smoothly.

“How are you liking it?”

“It’s not bad.”

What was I to make of this relationship? It didn’t seem likely that they had been romantically involved in the past, or anything like that. This felt more like the bond between a parent and child, or a brother and sister.

Though, looking at it the opposite way, it was possible that her constant grumpiness was because the two of us didn’t get along, and this level of friendliness was normal for her...

As should have been apparent when she was allowed to take the wheel of a twenty-million-yen luxury sedan, Kozakura was a good driver. The engine sang as she effortlessly navigated Tokyo’s busy streets. I was surprised how fast she accelerated when the road was open in front of her and there was the opportunity to speed up. She was all hyped up, rather than being her usual lethargic self, so that worried me in other ways.

“I never knew you loved cars this much.” It seemed Toriko hadn’t known this side of her either.

“I haven’t ridden in one for a while,” Kozakura responded. “I had to let go of the one I had, too.”

“Why’s that?”

“Hmm? Driving on my own is boring.”

“Were you going for drives with someone else before?”

Just as Toriko asked that, the light turned green. When Kozakura stepped down on the accelerator without answering, Toriko and I were pressed back against our seats, letting out little screams.

After driving for forty minutes, we arrived at a glass-sided building in the business district near Tameike-sannou Station. This place was utterly foreign to me. My only impression of it was that the name *Sannou*, which meant “mountain king,” sounded strong. Also, since the name had *Tameike* in it, there was presumably a pond somewhere.

Across the road from the building, there was a massive stone torii gate and a wide set of stone stairs. It was apparently a large shrine, and I could see there was a copse of trees at the top of the stone stairs.

The car went into the building's underground parking lot. Kozakura brought it to a stop in a corner where there was a row of luxury cars.

Once we all got out, Kozakura locked the vehicle and returned the key to Migiwa. "Yeah, it's a good car. Thanks."

"If you work with us here, you are welcome to drive it as much as you like."

"It's kind of you to offer, but I prefer to leave my house as little as possible."

With Migiwa leading the way, we got aboard an elevator. Looking at the panel on the wall, every floor in this building was taken up by some institution called the "Kantou Next IT Worker's Accident Insurance Association Physical Examination Center."

Migiwa produced a key on a chain from his pocket, put it into a hole in the control board for the elevator, and turned it. A metal plate on the bottom of the panel slid open, revealing a small number pad which was separate from the normal buttons. Migiwa's fingers raced across it with familiarity, and the elevator began to rise. The liquid crystal display that would usually show the floor number had vanished. When the elevator stopped and the door opened, I still had no idea how far we had gone up.

When we disembarked into the elevator hall, there was a red carpet laid out at our feet. The sides of the corridor were made of polished wood, and the antique-style lighting cast a soft light on the hall. The interior here made me think less of a research institute, and more of a luxury hotel with a long history.

We walked down the carpet, and on the other side of a pair of glass double doors there was an unmanned reception desk. There was no one in the reception room past there, either. The heavy wooden tables, the leather couches, and even the metal ashtrays—every piece of furniture felt high-class.

Following behind Migiwa, we continued further in past the reception room. I couldn't sense anyone. Even though everything looked well maintained, I started to feel like I was in a ruin.

“It’s awfully quiet. Is this summer vacation, or something?” I asked.

“We do not really have a summer vacation,” Migiwa answered. “We try not to have too many people around, you see. Had I known you would all be coming, I would have arranged to have someone at the reception, and other staff on hand. I must apologize for my ineptitude.”

“N-No...”

It throws me off balance when he speaks so politely. It’s like this is work. These sorts of upper-class people really do exist, huh.

“I should note, this floor is almost entirely meeting rooms, offices, and other rooms where practical business is done. There is a small number of researchers and medical staff on the other floors.”

“You say you try not to keep too many people around, but why?” Toriko asked.

“There are cases where items from the other world exert negative effects on the human body and mind... I cannot imagine you were unaware of this, were you?”

Toriko and I looked at Kozakura.

“What’s that look for? As the person holding onto the objects, I’m in the same boat as you are.”

“You could have said something, couldn’t you?”

“Now, listen. Before you start worrying about whether the gifts you’ve been bringing back are dangerous, maybe put some thought into what it is you’re doing in the first place. Going to the other world is clearly going to have a far worse effect on your body and mind.”

“W-Well, yes, but... you’re the one who said you’d buy them from us!”

“Because I thought it was dangerous for you to have them! Here I am, acting out of concern for you, and you go and get carried away! I’m not a pawn shop or an antiques dealer, okay?!”

When Kozakura and I started arguing, Migiwa interjected. “Now, now... It is a fact that we want to collect UBL artifacts—foreign objects from the other world.

Ever since I first heard about your discoveries, I had asked to be contacted if you found anything else.”

“What do you want to do with these artifacts? Do you think they’ll give you some lead in your study of the other world?” I asked. Migiwa got a troubled look on his face.

“It is true that we thought that at first. As an idea, that remains unchanged. However, the fact of the matter is...”

Halfway through speaking, Migiwa seemed to reconsider and trailed off. Kozakura got angry.

“That’s why we came, to show them the facts.”

“You are absolutely certain this is all right?” Migiwa checked, and Kozakura nodded.

For a moment, they looked at each other in silence. Eventually, Migiwa lowered his eyes and spoke.

“I understand. Kamikoshi-sama, Nishina-sama—I will show you the lower floors,” he said, turning his back towards us. When we looked at Kozakura, she thrust with her chin, as if to say, *Get going already*. Where did her good mood from before go?

We were led down two flights of stairs. After we passed through two doors, which were layered like an airlock, the smell of disinfectant assailed my nostrils. Unlike the floor above, here, bright fluorescent lights illuminated an inorganic corridor. As I was remembering, *Come to think of it, there was something about a physical examination center written in the elevator...* A man who was walking towards us from the opposite end of the corridor looked up from his tablet to see us. He had a shaved head and wore glasses and a white coat. “Migiwa. Did something happen?”

“I am showing some visitors around. Is everyone unchanged?”

The man in the white coat raised an eyebrow in surprise. “They’ve settled down. Don’t agitate them. Erm, visitors, please, don’t stare at their faces too much. Avoid talking loudly about their symptoms, too. Even if they don’t seem to be conscious, they may still be able to see and hear you, after all.”

Having said that, the man in the white coat walked away down the corridor.

“Is that all right?” Migiwa asked. I don’t know that I understood the situation, but I could at least tell that there were patients here with serious symptoms.

The corridor was lined with wide sliding doors at intervals. Each sliding door had a window facing into the corridor beside it, which allowed us to see inside the rooms. This felt less like a hospital, and more like a zoo or prison.

I peered through the first window. There was a simple room inside which only had a bed, desk, and chair. I couldn’t see anyone. For some reason, there was a mountain of waste paper, like someone had been using a shredder, piled in the corner.

“There’s no one in there, huh?” Toriko said in a low voice, but Migiwa shook his head.

“You will find them over there.” Migiwa was pointing to the mountain of shredded paper.

What is he saying? I thought suspiciously as I squinted. *No, all I see is a pile of trash—*

The very next moment, I jumped back away from the glass in surprise.

That wasn’t scrap paper. It was a huddled human being.

They had largely maintained human form, but the surface of their body—their skin, hair, face, and fingers—had turned into fine, dangling strips, and those strips were swaying gently. They looked like a human being that had been put through a shredder, but lacked the colors of flesh and blood.

“...What is *that*?” Toriko asked, then, noticing, in a tense whisper she asked, “Are they alive?”

“They are indeed alive, though I pity them for it. Their body has become exceptionally light, so the air conditioner always blows them into that corner of the room. I do not know whether they are conscious, but I pray not.”

His polite but disinterested explanation gave me the chills. Though he said they were alive, Migiwa spoke of this person almost as if they were already dead.

“How did they end up like that...?” I asked, unable to look away.

“It seems that they came into contact with some sort of anomaly in the UBL. There was nothing out of the ordinary when they first returned, but some days later, these symptoms suddenly developed...”

He used different terminology, but was Migiwa saying this person had stepped into a glitch in the other world?

“Is that enough? Let us move on to the next one.”

Remembering we had been told not to stare too much, I tore my eyes away from the person.

The next window was dark, illuminated with ultraviolet light. In the middle of a room with no furniture, there was a human figure standing straight. Their unmoving feet were buried up to their ankles in the bare dirt. From what I could see in the meager visible light, from the shoulders up, this person looked like a great sunflower. Their dish-like head, rimmed by wilted petals, or perhaps clumps of hair, was completely covered in mysterious bumps.

The next window was bright again, and the patient lay in their bed. There was a bookshelf up against the wall, and the top of the desk was kept orderly. The patient who was laying there was covered in translucent growths that sprouted from their entire body. They grew in no uniform shape, twisting upwards, then radiating outwards across the surface of the ceiling. I had a feeling they slightly resembled the horn-like things that grew out of me that time I almost got taken out by the Kunekune.

The next room was covered ceiling to floor in symbols and drawings that had been scrawled by hand. There was an emaciated man writing something in a frenzy. I was relieved to have finally found a patient we might be able to understand. I’d seen this kind of thing in movies before...

But that relief was blown away when I looked at the man’s hands. Thin, white, bug-like things crawled out from between his nails, writhing around on the ground before becoming written characters on their own.

“The DS Lab was originally founded to explore the unknown world named UBL. However, not long after we began our research, there was one victim after

another. Organized expeditions were more or less ended, and our main objective shifted to protecting the victims and seeking ways to treat them,” Migiwa’s detached voice came down from above me.

“Then these people were originally...”

“Yes. These are people who entered the other world, and had something happen to them when they came into contact with an item that originated there. They include VIPs from companies involved in the founding of the DS Lab, as well as people connected to members of the Diet, their families, and even the members themselves. The reason the DS Lab continues to exist, even after losing its original purpose, is because of continued financial support from those sorts of people.”

That was a bit too much information... Though, I guess that worker’s accident insurance stuff was just a cover story so they could buy a medical facility, huh.

I turned to Kozakura, wanting to get her opinion. I had a feeling she’d been awfully quiet for a while now, and it turned out Kozakura was at the rear of the group, looking away from the windows. “Is this what you wanted to show us, Kozakura-san?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Kozakura said, scowling as she glared at a featureless wall. “Do you have some idea as to why I said I don’t want to go to the other world now?”

“Yeah... But you didn’t stop us from going, did you?” I said, and Kozakura’s eyes grew harsh.

“I’ve stopped expecting I can stop you. No matter how much I tell you not to, if you’re gonna go, you’re gonna go. It’s stupid. You’re idiots, both of you.” Kozakura’s voice was harsh. “This is enough. If you don’t feel a sense of danger after seeing all this, then it’s out of my hands,” she spat, then turned around.

“Have you two seen enough?” Migiwa asked, and there were no objections. Toriko and I nodded, then followed Kozakura, who had her shoulders raised in anger, back the way we came.

When I turned back one last time, perhaps because of the nearly blinding lights, the white hall of sick rooms seemed to extend farther than the eye could see, as if it went on forever.

Leaving the hospital floor, we took the elevator down this time. Unlike the pretty one that we took on the way up, this was more of a work elevator.

After descending a number of floors, we came to a floor displayed as “lab.” Once we had walked a short way down a corridor where the lights were kept as low as possible, Migiwa, who was leading the way, came to a stop.

“This was Uruma-san’s lab,” he said before opening the door. He flipped a switch on the wall, and the fluorescent lights flashed on, illuminating the room.

The ceiling was high, and there wasn’t a single window. The large desk was surrounded by steel shelves which were packed full of books. There was everything from maps and newspaper cutouts to fliers from real estate companies and concerts pinned to the wall, and there was a mess of sticky notes and strings tying the pins together.

Without a word, Toriko walked into the room on shaky legs. I followed behind her. Kozakura stood beside me, looking up at the bookshelves in silence.

“Will you be okay, Kozakura-san?” I asked her.

“How so?”

“It’s Satsuki-san’s room, right? Um...”

“Oh, I’ve been here a number of times already.”

“Oh... I see.”

“Both when Satsuki was still here, and after she vanished. I understand how Toriko feels, but rummaging through this room now isn’t going to uncover any new leads,” Kozakura said with a resigned smile on her face.

When Toriko reached the desk, she began pulling drawers open, flipping through the science magazines that had been left out on it, and moving around restlessly. If we left her to it, she was likely to turn this place upside down like it was a police raid.

Suddenly, she stopped. When Toriko turned back to look at us, she had a thick notebook of B5 size paper with a black leather cover. “What is this?”

“That would be Uruma-san’s research notes.”

As soon as she heard Migiwa’s answer, Toriko undid the clasp and opened the book.

She froze up.

“Huh...?”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I can’t read them...”

I took a peek and was surprised. It was true—they were completely unreadable. The neatly handwritten text was in a series of characters I was seeing now for the first time.

“Uruma-san encoded all her research notes using a script that she developed herself,” Migiwa explained.

“Why?” Toriko asked.

“It could be that she was wary of others stealing the fruits of her research. After she vanished, we attempted to decipher them, but found no success.”

“Kozakura! You can’t read these?” Toriko turned and asked. Kozakura shrugged her shoulders.

“If I could, I already would have. Just how many times do you think I’ve looked through those notes since Satsuki vanished?” Kozakura said. She lowered her eyes as if thinking about it pained her. “I even fantasized about her having left clues only I would understand. But it was all wasted effort. I’m sorry, but I don’t know a thing.”

“...I see.” Deflated, Toriko sat down in the desk chair. “Where could you have gone, Satsuki?” Toriko mumbled to herself, lovingly stroking the arm rests. I felt like I was watching something I shouldn’t, and looked away despite myself.

Toriko’s current mental state, and the sad husks of people who had experienced encounters of the fourth kind which I had just seen... Having been assaulted by these two worrying things at the same time, I was close to my limit.

“Are you quite all right? Pardon my saying this, but the color of your face looks...” Migiwa said, peering dubiously at my face.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I looked up at Migiwa. After what he’d shown me on the floor above, who was he to ask if I was all right?

“Are you a researcher here, too, Migiwa-san? I dunno, it feels like there’s hardly any staff, so it’s hard to see this lab as being functional.”

Migiwa easily nodded. “It is as you say. I am merely what you might call the manager of this building. The worker’s accident insurance business we operate to camouflage this facility and procure funding is operating smoothly, and you will find many workers if you descend to those floors. However, as you have seen, the air on the lab floors is disturbed only by the air conditioning that we keep running to no real end.”

“It was the nineties when this place was established, right? How were things back then?”

“The DS Lab originated as a study group inside a certain large electronics manufacturer. That group, which started out with the goal of studying life sciences for the new era, discussed new age topics including qigong and free energy, and the practicality of them.”

The occult-tinged vocabulary that came up made me cringe. If I hadn’t just seen the victims of the other world upstairs, I’d have written these guys off as a cult then and there.

“This may sound surprising to you now, but at the time, there were a number of similar movements. Some were even led by the government. Not long after, there was a cult group that carried out a major terrorist attack. That created a sense of taboo around the occult, meaning these movements could no longer be public, but they survived in the inner circles of companies and political organizations. The DS Lab itself survived by embracing Diet members and other members of the government. Then, at some point...”

Migiwa looked around, as if thinking, and then continued.

“Are you familiar with the word *tankou*? These are the lights you see when

you close your eyes. It is a word that originates in Sendou, a branch of internal alchemy. Through repeated practice of the microcosmic orbit, light appears behind the forehead, and focusing it allows you to open the third eye, they say.”

I’d never heard of it.

“It seems the same thing is discussed in yoga. As you meditate, you gradually begin to see the light, and depending on what chakras you have opened, the color of the light will differ.”

“Huh. Well, that sounds like a load of bollocks.” I frowned, but Kozakura shook her head.

“You really can see them. If you leave a human in the darkness, the brain will start fabricating lights that don’t exist. If you try to look at the back of your eyelids in a dark place, you’ll soon realize it’s not completely dark.”

“Ohh, is that right? Maybe I’ll try it.” Toriko sounded impressed. Kozakura scoffed.

“Don’t. Attempting the occult on your own is a shortcut to messing up your autonomic nerves. That goes especially for people like you two, whose sense of spiritual balance is already gone. You’ll break down in no time.”

I blinked and looked down at Kozakura. “Is that a fact?”

“When a human sees something, it is the output of information taken in by the sensory organs having been fed through the brain’s visual processing. If you interfere with that process along the way, it’s even possible to intentionally see illusions. When it comes to this tankou stuff, it’s not even a concrete image—it’s just light. But this isn’t a kind of processing we usually do consciously, so when you try to do it, it can go awry.”

“Is that like how when you consciously try to breathe, it’s actually harder?”

“Or how when you’re thinking about whether to keep the blankets over your chin, or under it, you can’t get to sleep?”

Kozakura gave a general nod to my and Toriko’s analogies before continuing.

“So, it’s simple to see tankou. It’s an experience anyone can have, so pop

occult uses it as a sort of gateway drug, mixing internal alchemy and yoga as they make a business of it. Normally, it's the seminar model, where you show people a slightly mysterious experience, then milk them for money, but there are also cases where it leads to induction into a destructive cult..."

Kozakura seemed to remember something as she looked at me, then at Toriko.

"You might not fall for it, Sorawo-chan, but, Toriko, you shouldn't touch that stuff. With your weak will, one mystical experience and you might be taken in by a cult."

"Whaa, isn't that a little harsh? Am I that weak-willed?" Toriko said, sounding offended.

"You're super easily hurt, and you'll wag your tail and follow anyone you take a liking to. Not everyone in this world is as benevolent as I am."

That harsh assessment made Toriko purse her lips. "I don't follow people *that* easily. I choose people carefully."

"I'm not so sure about that. Right, Sorawo-chan?"

"S-Sure..."

I could only give a half-hearted response, because I was distracted by the image of Toriko wagging her tail back and forth like a dog.

While I was trying to calm myself, Migiwa spoke up again. "I would not recommend it, either. There are those upstairs whose symptoms were brought on by doing that. In fact, it was tankou that led the DS Lab to discover the other world in the first place."

According to Migiwa, this is how it happened: At the DS Lab, through the use of yoga and Sendou practices and meditation, they hoped to "expand the spirit." I don't know what that means, but... they started with mysticism and began going down the road to becoming a cult. However, along the way, something strange happened. The members who were meditating began to see strange scenes in their tankou.

A field of dried grass. Ruined buildings with unfathomable designs. Deep, dark

woods. Beaches with white sand.

In these seemingly post-apocalyptic scenes, there were no people.

The number of people who had similar experiences gradually increased, and eventually there were those who entered the light.

The tankou they saw on those occasions was an exceptionally deep color of blue, so this world came to be called the Ultrablue Landscape—UBL.

“...So that’s what Satsuki was talking about. The blue light’s dangerous,” Toriko mumbled to herself. “But why blue? You said the light you see is silver, right, Sorawo?”

I nodded silently. If I thought back to the situations a blue light had approached us, it was all pretty dangerous. Like the time the windmill woman had lured us inside the room modeled on Toriko’s apartment, and on the beach just recently. It seemed certain that the blue light represented the “deep” regions of the other world. If that was the case, if they passed through this blue tankou, did that mean they made direct contact with that place...?

“I said that in yoga, the color of light changes depending on the chakras you’ve opened. In that system, the fifth chakra, in the throat, is blue, and the sixth chakra, in the forehead, is indigo. It may be that these traditional methods of mysticism include ways of contacting the other world—is what some in the DS Lab began to propose. No matter what literature we read, there was nothing similar to that bizarre field of grass, but no one paid any mind to that. Everyone was obsessed with this unknown world we had discovered.”

An ominous tone crept into Migiwa’s voice.

“The expeditions to the other world began, and it even became possible to bring back items from the other side. The researchers believed they had succeeded in materializing the spirit, and were ecstatic to discover these items behaved in ways inexplicable to established science. However...”

Their joy was short lived. Those who had made contact with the UBL developed psychological disorders. There were continued outbreaks of insanity and disappearances, and on top of that, individuals who experienced violent physical transformations appeared.

“Many of them died, and most of those who survived were in no state to ever live in society again. I believe you saw that earlier. Ever since, the DS Lab has made care of the victims of the other world our primary activity, and we continue to barely exist with the goal of finding some clue on how to treat them.”

“Treat them? You think you can cure anyone of that...?”

I spoke without thinking, and may have been insensitive. I closed my mouth when I realized that, but Migiwa replied without batting an eyelash.

“To tell you the truth, we still have no idea where to even begin treating them. That is why, in practical terms, the best we can do is something close to pain management... No, there are many cases where even that is not possible. That is because there are more than a few patients who are in a state where we cannot tell whether or not they are suffering. However, despite that, in the belief that researching the other world and items from there may, in the future, be of some use, the DS Lab continues its activities.”

My earlier wariness had faded, and at some point I found myself drawn into his story. If what Migiwa was telling us was true, they had entered the other world from a different route than we had. Though it seemed the outcome was terrifying.

“What was Satsuki doing?” Toriko asked.

“Uruma-san made contact with the DS Lab some years ago. She claimed to have a safer way of going to and from the other world, and did, in fact, bring UBL artifacts with her, so we prepared her a desk here as a researcher. However, we have made no headway on researching the many artifacts she brought to our warehouse.”

“I wonder where she found out about the other world. Do you know, Kozakura?”

“I don’t. When she roped me into this, Satsuki was already working with the DS Lab, but she took the more mundane approach of finding entrances to the other world in a variety of places. None of this mysticism stuff.”

“Yes, that is true. Her approach was completely different from ours. It seems

she used places where bizarre phenomena occurred, or buildings that were prone to accidents as a means to enter the other world. She said it was common for creatures from the other world or artifacts to have leaked onto this side in such places.”

It was slightly different from my own style, where I found the door to the Otherside while exploring ruins, too. There might have been even more entrances to the other world than I thought.

“I might add, she was also recruiting promising individuals to expand her investigation of the other world. Were you one of them, Nishina-sama?”

When Migiwa said that, Toriko suddenly looked up.

“One of them?”

“Yes. I recall her telling me there were a number of young people she had her eye on.”

“...” Toriko was silent.

There were others? Satsuki had more pawns than just Toriko and Karateka?

I had decided to ignore everything involving Satsuki-san, but when I saw Toriko so dejected, it made my resolve waver a little.

Don't make that face, Toriko.

Just forget that woman.

Unable to watch any longer, I was about to say something to her when Toriko looked at me as if an idea had just occurred to her.

“...That's right. Sorawo, could you try reading these notes for me?”

“Huh?”

What is she saying? She must know I can't read them.

I was confused, but Toriko leaned in closer to me.

“Have you forgotten your own right eye?”

“...”

“The writing from this side gets messed up when we go to the other world,

right? But there is text we can read over there, too, isn't there? What do you think would happen if we brought it back here?"

"No... Hold on a moment. You're saying that's what this is?"

I looked down at the black leather cover of the notebook Toriko was holding.

"I dunno, but it seems like something we could try, right? What if this script wasn't created by Satsuki, and it came from the other world instead?"

The next thing I knew, it wasn't just Toriko: Kozakura and Migiwa were staring at me, too.

"You're saying that, with Sorawo-chan's eye, we might be able to read it?"

"It's just an idea I had."

"That is an exceptionally fascinating idea, but it would mean Uruma-san was versed in the language of the other world, would it not?"

I backed away slowly as Kozakura and Migiwa stared at me. Toriko stood up, walking over to my side.

"Sorawo. Please."

Unable to resist her desperately pleading eyes, I looked away.

"...Okay. Got it." I took the notebook like she had asked. The black leather cover clung to my fingers.

If this didn't work out, it wasn't my fault. Not even Toriko would blame me. Despite that, I was afraid I was going to disappoint Toriko, and it depressed me.

"I'll try, at least..." I said, then undid the clasp on the notebook. I opened it to the page where the bookmark string had been left. Taking a deep breath, I focused my right eye on the sequence of characters I couldn't understand.

"...Oh."

The text—it was changing.

The characters blurred in my vision, becoming like stains scattered across the paper, then reformed into different shapes.

"Well, Sorawo?" Toriko asked.

“...It’s getting to the point where I can read it.”

“Seriously?” Kozakura groaned. Migiwa leaned in, too.

As the shapes of the characters changed, a hidden meaning emerged.

“What? What does it say? Tell us.” Toriko’s eager voice disrupted my concentration. Even as I wished she would shut up, I tried reading out the text exactly as it was written.

When I looked up from the notebook, the three of them were staring at me with expressions of shock.

I covered my mouth. “What did I just say?” I asked slowly.

Suddenly, there was a bright burst of light in the room.

That intense light, like lightning without thunder, was blue. I closed my eyes reflexively, and a yellow afterimage remained burned into the back of my eyelids.

When I hesitantly opened my eyes once more, I felt every hair on my body raise.

There was another human figure in the room. A tall woman with black hair and black clothes.

The one who had been watching from beyond the gate as we escaped from the beach in the other world.

Satsuki Uruma.

The woman who everyone but me had been searching for was floating in the air, behind Toriko.

6

“Wahhh?!” I let out an incredible cry of surprise and backed up against the bookshelves. Pointing behind Toriko, my voice quivered as I yelled. “Behind! Behind you!”

Toriko whipped around. Kozakura clutched her head and cowered there.

“Huh...? There’s nothing there, though...?” Toriko said, sounding dubious. Timidly looking behind her, Kozakura lowered her arms in relief.

“What was that for...? Don’t scare us like that!” she shouted, rising indignantly.

“Kamikoshi-sama... Is something the matter?” Migiwa asked, sounding concerned.

I looked at the three of them in disbelief. Couldn't they see? I could see her so clearly.

I looked up again, and Satsuki Uruma was there.

Her eyes fixed on Toriko, unblinking. She was frozen in place, like a still image projected in the air; her lowered head and her slumped limbs felt awfully ominous. She was holding something in her right hand. What was that rectangular thing?

"Sorawo, are you okay?"

"Huh? Uh... Yeah."

Somehow, I managed to look back to Toriko. She had stood up from her chair and was peering at my face.

"Can you see something with your right eye?" she asked me in a serious tone, and I didn't know what to say.

I reacted despite myself. But even if she did know I could see something, I could still play dumb and hide that it was Satsuki Uruma. What now? How was I going to play this off?

Was it time to give up and tell her? That Satsuki-san had appeared in this room, and was, at this very moment, staring down at Toriko...

Caught in an intense clash between the voice in my heart, which told me I should obviously relay this vital information, and my feelings, which absolutely did not want to do that, I froze up.

Unable to utter a word, I slowly shook my head.

"Sorawo, tell me. What do you see there?"

"No... Nothing! There's nothing!"

When I shouted that desperate lie, I saw something square fall in the corner of my vision, and it hit the floor with a thud.

It was a square, woodwork cube, about twenty centimeters to a side. It was assembled from small parts, like a wooden mosaic, and complex seams crawled across the surface of it. There was no lid to speak of—this was the thing Satsuki

Uruma had just been holding.

When I looked up, the woman who had been floating in midair vanished in an instant.

“What is this...?” Migiwa whispered suspiciously. The other three all had their eyes fixed on the box that had suddenly appeared. I instinctively switched to my right field of vision, and the box was wrapped in a powerful silver halo.

There was something trying to emerge out of the surface of this box. It was a chubby bird with a short beak that resembled a shrike; it was a translucent red, with wings that were maybe as long as a finger.

Kozakura, who was nearest to the box, only looked down at it as if unnerved, but showed no reaction to the red bird.

The bird spread its wings and rose into the air. When I realized its beak was pointed towards Kozakura, I got a very bad feeling.

“Kozakura-san, listen—”

I tried to warn her, but the bird flapped its wings, and charged straight at Kozakura.

Instinctively, I pushed Kozakura out of the way.

“Wha...?!”

Kozakura was light. I might not have rated my strength very highly, but maybe the urgency of the situation unlocked some dumb brute strength in me, because she flew further than I’d anticipated. Kozakura struck the bookcase shoulder-first and wailed.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?!”

“S-Sorry. Just now, the bird...”

I made a nonsensical excuse, as I looked around to see where the red bird had gone.

I don’t see it... Where did it go?

The next thing I knew, Toriko was looking at me with a harsh expression on her face.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Sorawo—” Toriko reached out towards me. For a moment, I thought she was going to slap me, and I ducked my head.

Her hand clapped down on my shoulders. Then Toriko’s head fell against my chest.

“Huh?”

Before I could recover from my confusion, Toriko fell to her knees. I rushed to support her as her body began slumping to the ground.

“To-Toriko?”

“Urgh...” Her strained features looked horribly pale.

“Hey, what happened?!” Kozakura, having realized something was wrong, supported Toriko with me.

“My stomach... hurts...” Toriko said through gritted teeth.

Once I worked with Kozakura to sit her down in a chair, Toriko doubled over. The red bird lifted off from her back. I watched helplessly as it traced a ring above us, then returned to the box.

Damn it! What was I doing? That red bird was harmful, just like I’d originally sensed. While I was protecting Kozakura, it got Toriko!

“This cube... It can’t be.” Migiwa was scrutinizing the box. His pallor had changed.

“Do you know what it is?!” I pressed him.

“This is one of the UBL artifacts that Uruma-san collected. It should be firmly under lock and key in the warehouse, so what is it doing here?”

What was it doing here? She herself—or at least something that had taken her form—had just left it here.

“She said she collected it in the secluded mountains. It was apparently a cursed item. I have heard it selectively causes injury to the internal organs of nearby women and children,” Migiwa explained, looking down at the box. “If I recall, it was called a Kotoribako.”

I stared at the wooden box in shock.

Of all things... it had to be this nasty piece of work! Kotoribako was a true horror story from Shimane.

One day, a friend who visits the narrator's house brings an old wooden box she says she found in a shed. When another friend who has a strong sense for the supernatural sees it, he goes pale, and calls his father, who is a Shinto priest. The friend, who says he is the only one there who can deal with it, performs an incredible exorcism while crying and coughing.

Exhausted after the ritual, the friend says it will be fine now. The narrator asks what he means, and the friend explains that the box is a Kotoribako, created to exterminate the bloodline of its target.

This famous bit of net lore, a thing which was dangerous to even approach, was now in front of me.

Why did you bring this thing here, Satsuki Uruma?!

It was fair to say she was clearly trying to hurt us with this, yeah? What would she want to harm Toriko's belly for? Weren't they friends?!

Seeing Toriko injured, I was even more on edge than usual, and I glared at the Kotoribako through my right eye. Without looking away from it, I asked, "Migiwa-san, do you have a hard rod? One that can bust this box."

"I do."

When Migiwa swung his right arm, there was a metallic rattle. Migiwa's extended hand held a collapsible police baton. *Does he always carry this? What a dangerous guy*, I thought, but I still spoke up. "Please, break that thing. Right away."

"Is it all right to destroy it?"

"If we leave it be, it's going to kill Toriko. You might be fine, though, Migiwa-san."

Migiwa nodded. "Very well."

Migiwa swung back his arm, then slammed the police baton down on the Kotoribako.

The box did not break. It just let out a dull thud, like he had struck a wall.

As if in retribution for the attack, one bird came out of the box after another.

“S... Stop! Stop!”

I hurriedly stopped Migiwa as he was about to strike a second blow.

Migiwa stopped his attack, and lowered the baton. The curse birds he couldn't see split into two groups, going around him to either side.

They slowly flew towards Toriko, who was groaning in the chair where she sat. I instinctively reached out to try and get in their way, but it was no good. The flock of red birds passed through the palm of my hand without me feeling a thing.

“Urrgh...” Toriko exhaled in pain. Each time a red bird passed through her body, she groaned as though she had been stabbed.

The red birds which passed through her and then returned to the box each carried something red in their beaks. It was like they were feasting on her innards.

Maybe the red birds sensed my attempt to interfere, because they came for me next.

Before I could get out of the way, a red bird dove into me close to my belly button. In an instant, I felt a dull sense of wrongness in my abdomen, and a thrusting pain.

“Ow...” I stifled a cry of pain. I didn't feel the bird coming out the other side, but I was in enough pain I wanted to sit down.

Like missiles focused on their target, the red birds came at me following different courses. It was like watching an explosion in slow motion. A directional explosion, where all the fragments were homing in on its victim to pump her full of holes. From the looks of it, even if I tried to move out of the birds' way, it wasn't going to do me any good. I could see, but not avoid them. I could only watch the shrapnel slowly close in, and tear me apart—it was just too horrible. It was certainly effective as a cursed item.

“Hey, Sorawo-chan. What's going on?” Kozakura asked as she rubbed Toriko's

back.

“To... Toriko’s been hit by the Kotoribako’s curse. We tried to break it, but that just stirred up the bees’ nest.” I explained, grimacing through the pain and chills. “You’re at risk right now, too. Please, get out of the room right now.”

“What about you, Sorawo-chan?”

“I’ll do... something.”

“Do what?”

“Still thinking about that part.”

I revved my brain into high gear. If bullets worked, I would shoot that thing to splinters right now, but the thing was apparently indestructible. How was I, who wasn’t an exorcist, supposed to take this box down?

If it followed the original story, there was something inside the Kotoribako. If I recall, it was several people’s severed fingers, and umbilical cords, but... the core of the curse was being protected by the box’s outer shell. If I couldn’t strike the inside directly, I couldn’t cut the curse off at the root, so I needed to find some way to open up the box.

In order to do that, I was going to need more than my right eye—I needed Toriko’s left hand, too.

Clutching my stomach, I brought my face close to Toriko’s, and slapped her cheeks. “Toriko. I want your help.”

“Urgh...”

“It hurts, I know. I’m sorry. But we have to do this.”

Toriko raised her blood-drained face.

“What do I need to touch this time...?”

I couldn’t look away from her pain-warped expression. Her knitted brow. Her hair, slicked to forehead with sweat. Her cheeks which twitched at the intermittent pain. I never knew she could make a face like this...

“Sorawo?”

“Ye... Yeah. Um, you see the box lying there? That’s what’s making your

stomach hurt,” I collected myself and explained. Toriko turned to look at the box.

“Okay... And?”

“You know how you took apart Hasshaku-sama’s hat when we escaped from the beach? Do that again.”

“Open a gate, you mean?”

“No. How should I explain this? There’s something in that box causing the curse. If we can just open it up, I think we can destroy it directly.”

“...You really are something, Sorawo,” Toriko said, her pale face smiling.

I turned back to Migiwa. “We’re opening the box. I don’t know what will come out, so please stay outside the room, just to be safe. Take care of Kozakura-san for us.”

“I cannot—” Migiwa tried to object, but I quickly spoke over him.

“I don’t know about you Migiwa-san, but it’s dangerous for Kozakura-san to be near the Kotoribako. We can defend ourselves, so, please, protect her if anything goes that way.”

I really didn’t know what Migiwa could do, but the guy was carrying a police baton, so he probably knew how to use it.

Migiwa still looked hesitant, but he ultimately nodded.

“...Very well.”

“Wait, Sorawo-chan, I—”

“Sorry. I don’t really have time to look after you.”

When she saw the look on my face, Kozakura bit her lip. “I get you... Take care.”

Kozakura looked back several times as she left the room. Migiwa bowed politely and then closed the door.

The moment we were alone, I squatted down, unable to bear the pain any longer.

“You okay, Sorawo?”

“Urrgh, ow, ow, ow, ow... owwwww.”

I could do little more than groan as the red birds pecked at my guts. I wanted to make yakitori out of the lot of them.

Toriko crawled out of her chair. We supported one another through the pain. Unfortunately, that support couldn't make the pain go away, though.

“Augh, damn this hurts... I'm getting mad.”

“This is internal pain, huh?”

“We'll be in trouble if we let this drag on. Let's get this over with.”

With labored breaths, we crawled towards the box.

“This box just fell out of thin air, didn't it? Right after you read from the notebook...”

“Sorry. I think this is probably my fault,” I said, the regret eating at me. I had been careless. In the other world, a single mistake could be fatal—I knew that, and yet I still incautiously read out the text Satsuki Uruma left behind. Even if Toriko did ask me to do it, that had been reckless of me.

“No, I was the one who had you read it... But why did you look so surprised?”

“Huh?”

“Just before the box appeared.”

“That's because... I could see it before it appeared.”

Before she could ask me any more, I put both my hands on the Kotoribako. It felt slightly warm in the palms of my hands, as if there were a source of heat inside it.

“Is it okay touching that thing?”

“Dunno. It's already messed us up, though...”

Cautiously lifting the box, I carefully scrutinized the surface of it. The silver lines that ran over the wooden mosaic were our only clue to opening this box. The boundary between the surface world and the other world were complexly

folded together into the form of a box. The birds appeared as if leaking out through that gap.

What I was trying to do here was like disarming a bomb. Dismantling a bomb that had long since gone off, and was in the process of tearing us to shreds.

“I’ll hold it, so can you touch it with your left hand as I direct?”

“Okay.”

Toriko removed her glove, and I turned one of the box’s sides toward her.

“Try pressing the center, and turning it.”

“Which way?”

“I dunno. Whichever way it turns.”

When Toriko touched it, the silver light shone brighter. Her finger sank in, turning in a counter-clockwise direction, and the parts on the surface spread out to the outside, like flower petals.

“It moved!”

“Okay... Now try shifting this part down.”

When Toriko’s fingers moved the light, the parts moved with it. The true form of the box was the light that poured out from within it. It was a puzzle that could only be solved with my eye and Toriko’s hand.

Shifting, turning, pushing, opening, folding, hooking... The initially simple movements of the parts gradually grew more complex. Suddenly, Toriko seemed worried.

“You’re not going to ask me to return this thing to how it was, right?”

“The thought hadn’t occurred to me.”

“Well, I can’t do it. No way.”

Each time the parts moved and took on a new form, the number of red birds gradually increased. At the same time, the pain slowly grew. Was it safe to assume we were getting closer to the center of the box? When I cautiously observed the light, I could tell there was a flow outward, through the gaps between the parts. We were following that flow upstream, towards the center.

"I feel like we've done something like this together before. When we went Kunekune hunting. We suffered then, too."

"Hey, you're right. That was pretty crazy, huh."

"This doesn't feel as gross as that, but... Damn, it hurts."

We kept shooting the breeze to distract ourselves from the pain.

"How much longer do you think this is going to take?" Toriko asked.

"I dunno... Until it stops hurting?"

"Urgh. I'd almost have preferred a bomb. This thing's a real *Hurt Locker*."

"What was that again?"

"It's a movie about defusing bombs. Ever seen it...?" Toriko said as she rolled onto her side. "Sorry. Mind if I lie down a bit?"

"M-Me, too."

We both collapsed on the spot. We couldn't have gotten back up anymore. Moving our hands from where we lay on the floor, we kept trying to defuse this cursed bomb.

"You know... It's like we're lying side-by-side, playing a board game or something," I remarked.

"I don't wanna play a board game like this... This is hell..."

The Kotoribako had long since lost its cube shape, and had turned into a bizarre shape, like a miniature 3D maze. There were more parts than I could imagine fit inside a twenty centimeter cube. They spilled out of our hands, and spread around us.

"Sorawo, earlier, when you told Kozakura to get out of the room, you were hiding the fact you were in pain, right?"

"Was I?"

She sure was looking closely for someone in so much pain, I thought as I gave a non-answer.

"Why didn't you say anything? So she wouldn't worry?"

“Even if Kozakura-san stayed, she was going to be useless, you know? But she’d still keep talking. I figured if I was in pain, too, it would get too noisy...”

“Oh, yeah?” Toriko smiled. That gentle smile, like she was watching over me again.

“Wh-What?”

“I’m relieved. It looks like you’ll be fine even if I go away.”

“Huh? Could you not say weird things like that now?!”

My reaction made Toriko laugh a little.

“I figured I’d better say it while I can. We never know what’s going to happen, after all.”

“Cut it out, okay? Keep that hand moving.”

I told her I didn’t like it, but Toriko continued.

“I was worried what would happen if I disappeared after wrecking your life, but, Sorawo, you can get by just fine. I’ve been watching you all this time.”

Even as she lowered her face in pain, she didn’t stop talking. It was like she was delirious with fever.

“You worked to save the U.S. forces stranded at Kisaragi Station. And though you didn’t like the beach at first, we had a real blast in Naha, and on Ishigaki Island. When Karateka-chan came to you for help, you answered the call. You even came up with a nickname for her. Even though you never did that for me.”

I felt like I could detect a slight hint of dissatisfaction in Toriko’s voice there.

“I was worried about it after what Kozakura said, but Sorawo, you do have a human heart. You’re a real good girl. I know that.”

“No, you’re wrong... That’s not...”

“It was the same just now. You instinctively protected Kozakura. Not me.”

“S-Sorry,” I apologized, wanting to shrink into myself, but I was surprised to see Toriko shake her head.

“That’s not it. Sorawo, you had a tendency not to care about anyone but me,

so I was happy to see you could show concern for other people. I told you, didn't I? You need to learn more about the world other than me. That's why, when I'm gone, I'm sure—"

"Stop it! Why are you saying that?!"

Just as I shouted that, unable to take it anymore, there was a clicking sound between us.

At the ends of our outstretched arms, in the middle of the pile of puzzle parts that had kept expanding their territory, there was a cubic box. It looked no different in size from the original, but the surface was dirty, and it gave off the impression of great age. It didn't look like a puzzle. The top face was a lid. The silver light that had filled the area around us was emanating from the gaps of that lid.

We had finally reached it. The center of the Kotoribako—the core of the curse.

"...Toriko, this is it," I said as I tried to steady my breath.

There was a flock of red birds flying over top of our prone bodies. They were a winged curse that descended in turns to peck at our innards. The pain in my belly felt like someone had pounded a number of burning hot metal stakes through me, and I felt I might lose consciousness at any moment. It must have been even worse for Toriko, who had been afflicted before me.

"Let's save all the bothersome talking for later. For now, we'll open this thing up, and bust whatever's inside. We're almost there, so please."

"..."

"Toriko?"

There was no response. Toriko's forehead was pressed to the floor, her eyes closed. Had she passed out? I reached over to shake her shoulder.

"Toriko, Toriko, wake up. We're almost done."

"..."

"Toriko!"

I raised my voice, but she still didn't stir. Getting worried, I put my hand in front of Toriko's mouth. I brought the back of my hand enough to almost touch her lips.

She's not breathing.

"No... No way."

I crawled closer to Toriko. I desperately sat her up, turning her body over to face upwards. Even as my rough treatment caused her back to hit the floor, Toriko showed no response.

"Come on, don't do this. You were just... blabbering on and on a little while ago..."

The tremble in my voice wasn't just because of the pain.

"Wake up! Toriko! Open your eyes!"

I impulsively raised my right hand, and slapped her cheek. There was a smacking sound. I felt bad about it for a moment, but Toriko still didn't wake up, which blew away the last of that consideration.

"Wake up! Wake up... I said, wake up, Toriko!"

I slapped her repeatedly as I shouted. It was no good; she didn't respond.

"R-Right. Deal with the inside of the box first."

Though I was shaken badly, I was thinking... If I just broke the Kotoribako, the curse afflicting us would surely vanish. That had to be right.

I grabbed the remaining box. I could open this lid even without borrowing Toriko's left hand.

I opened the box, feeling irritated at my trembling fingers, and the light poured out like water from inside. I blinked, then looked inside to try and capture the core of the curse with my right eye— My mind shut down.

There was nothing in the box.

Nothing I could capture with my right eye. No severed fingers of children, and no blood-drenched umbilical cords.

In my hand, the four sides of the box fell outwards.

The lid fell from my right hand, landing perfectly in a gap in the middle of the scattered parts on the floor.

That was the end.

The Kotoribako had ceased to be.

When I looked up, we were in the middle of a complex woodwork maze. The parts of the Kotoribako we had worked so hard to disassemble had come together to form the walls and floor.

The paths stretched in all directions, and seemed to stretch on forever as they branched off. It was as bright as noon. When I looked up, the maze had no roof, and a deep blue light spread out above the walls.

It was the sky of the other world.

The birds had ceased their assault, and yet the pain in my belly was unchanged. My organs felt heavy, and it was difficult to even breathe. Toriko wasn't moving, either. The red birds, resting their wings on the walls above, looking down at us, didn't so much as chirp.

"Hey, Toriko. This is bad. Get up already."

My voice was sucked emptily into the blue sky. Still, I kept talking.

"It looks like we came to a really deep point..."

We had come to the depth of the other world twice before now. The time with the Time-space Man, and at the beach in Okinawa. The ultrablue abyss above the maze felt strongly like those times.

In both cases, I had encountered something shaped like Satsuki Uruma.

My mind was dulled by the pain, but the understanding slowly came.

The bookmarked page. The black-clothed woman who had appeared when I read the text on it. The Kotoribako which she had thrown like a grenade.

And the path to the depths of the other world which opened with the Kotoribako.

Was it all a trap to bring us here?

The birds up on the walls all moved their heads in unison, looking down the

corridor.

I could see a tall shadow approaching from inside the woodwork mosaic maze.

Glossy black hair, and black clothes that looked like they belonged at a funeral. Deep behind a pair of eyeglasses, eyes so blue they were terrifying.

It's Satsuki Uruma.

I crawled to my backpack, which leaned against the wall. Opening the zipper, I pulled the Makarov out. Honestly, the assault rifle would have been more reliable, but it was disassembled inside the bag, so I couldn't use it now. If I'd had Toriko teach me how to assemble it instead of acting like it was such a bother... No, even if I had, there wasn't time to do it now.

The woman in black came to a stop. Toriko lay at her feet. When I turned the gun on her, those two unfathomable blue eyes stared back at me.

Was she the real deal? The windmill woman had clearly been a monster, but this time she had a human form. She looked the same in my right eye as my left. When I was looking at her like this, I realized again how beautiful she was. But that actually made me more uneasy. If this suddenly turned into a scary face, like Kankandara's, the rapid change in attractiveness might make me die of shock.

"Are you... Satsuki-san?" I asked, but the woman didn't respond. Her eyes strayed from me to Toriko who lay at her feet. I got a bad feeling, and in the next instant I heard a fluttering of tiny wings.

The flock of red birds all took to the air at once. The cries I heard from overhead sounded not so much avian as human. Ominous whispers, indistinct, as if spoken on the other side of a wall. The birds looked down at us, turning their beaks towards the ground, tucking their wings in, and diving.

If we took all those curses at once, we were through. My already weakened body couldn't possibly take it. I shut my eyes tight, and prepared for intense pain.

It's not coming.

I'm not the target!

I opened my eyes in time to see a deep red current of birds sucked into Toriko's body with incredible force.

"No!" My shout was erased by the beating of wings.

The moment after all those curses disappeared inside her belly, Toriko, who was lying on her back, jumped up.

From inside Toriko's belly, an intense whirlwind rose towards the sky. It resembled the structure that Toriko's body unraveled into as we were facing the windmill woman. She was being sucked into the sky with no less force than back then. The woman in black looked down at her with no expression.

Toriko was being taken... Taken away!

I took aim with my Makarov, and pulled the trigger.

There was no hesitation. The bullet struck the woman's left breast. She turned her head, looking in my direction. Using both hands to suppress the recoil, I kept on firing.

Miss.

Right shoulder.

Upper left arm.

Miss.

Throat.

Face.

Face.

Out of bullets.

I lowered the smoking Makarov and looked. Six out of eight bullets had hit, yet the woman in black was still standing. There were holes where she'd been shot, but she didn't shed a drop of blood.

The woman swayed like a tree in the wind. The bullet holes regenerated before my eyes, like with the Horned Man at Kisaragi Station. Though, slower...

Nothing about the phenomenon affecting Toriko changed, even though this had been enough to stop it with the windmill woman. Breaking the Kotoribako didn't help, shooting the woman in black didn't help. I had completely unloaded the Makarov. What was there left that I could do?

"...I'd decided not to do this anymore, too."

Now that it had come to this, I'd have to do it.

"This is your fault for not waking up faster, you know?"

Whispering an excuse she couldn't possibly hear, I focused my right eye on Toriko.

Using my right eye on humans. When I used it on Karateka recently, I nearly drove her insane. Ever since, I had done my best not to focus on people even if they entered my right field of vision, but now that it looked like I might lose Toriko, this was the only way I could think to change the situation.

Inside Toriko's body, which I now had caught in my right eye, I could see a donut-shaped object. It was the countless red birds which had flown inside Toriko before, all spinning around so fast they seemed to overlap with one another. The thing sprouting from the center of it was a three-dimensional geometric figure that resembled down feathers.

I remembered an observation Toriko had spouted when we encountered the windmill woman. If there were unknown beings on the other side of the blue light, and they were attempting to contact us, what would they do to understand us?

Would they try to process us into something they could understand? Was that the process I was witnessing right now?

Whew, there was a sound like air leaking.

Toriko had opened her mouth, and inhaled.

Nearly slumping to the ground in relief, I shouted, "Toriko! Wake—"

That's when I realized.

This was no good. If she regained consciousness now, she'd see the woman above her.

I discarded the Makarov, and threw myself towards Toriko. I jumped in front of where Toriko, who had coughed as she resumed breathing, was about to open her eyes, and hugged her head.

“So... Sorawo, what are you doing...?”

“Don’t open your eyes. Don’t look at anything. If you see it, it’ll drive you crazy.”

“Is whatever’s there... that crazy?”

“Yeah. That’s why you absolutely can’t look.”

“Are you all right, Sorawo?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

I looked up as I answered her, and the regenerating woman in black was looking down at us. *Don’t say anything. Please, just shut up.* There was murderous intent in the look I gave that woman.

“More importantly, Toriko, is your body okay? Is your head?”

“My head? What’s that supposed to mean?” Toriko laughed a little.

“I bet your stomach still hurts, right?”

“Not anymore it doesn’t. Not at all!”

Her response was strangely cheery.

“Actually, I feel light. Like everything unimportant is just melting away. It’s only going to get easier from here.”

“E-Excuse me?” I said.

“Why don’t you try it, too, Sorawo? I dunno how it works, but you probably just take a deep breath, jam your hand right inside your belly, and fish around at random.”

Aww, I knew it. This was no good.

No, wait. Hold on...

If I looked with my right eye... and she used her left hand...

“Toriko, you may be onto something.”

“Huh? You’re gonna tear your belly? Like, riiiip?”

“U-Uh...”

“Oh, good. I can go without any worries then! Because you can go there with me!”

I was speechless.

“Right?”

“...Just shut up. I’m borrowing your left hand, okay?”

“Okay. Be sure you give it back.”

I took her translucent left hand. “Listen, Toriko. When I give the signal, I want you to grab what your left hand is touching, and pull it out, okay?”

“Ahhh, hahh. The same as usual, huh?”

“Yeah, you’ve got it. The usual—here we go.”

I lifted her left hand at the elbow, and thrust it inside her own body.

“Urgh,” Toriko groaned. The translucent fist dug into her belly, and began influencing the red torus. The birds’ courses were disrupted, the revolution was warped, and the surface of the torus became uneven and wavy.

“Yeah, grab that! When you feel it, give it a pull! Can you do that?”

“I-I can, but, urkh! I feel kinda queasy. I think I’m gonna hurl.”

“Just do it!”

“Fine... Gwuh!”

When Toriko grabbed and pulled with her left hand, the warped torus was slowly dragged out from inside her belly.

As the torus was pulled out, the whirlwind rising out of her belly was disrupted, and then vanished. Once it was fully pulled out, what she was holding looked like a thousand bright red, folded paper cranes.

When Toriko’s hand moved away from it, the overlapping mass of red birds fell to the ground with a splat.

There! How do you like that?! You won’t take Toriko away that easily!

When I looked up to the woman in black, snorting furiously, I was shocked to find her face closer than I expected. Though she had shown hardly any reaction before, at some point she had leaned over as far as she could, leaving her face so close to mine that they were almost touching.

“Huh? This smell... It feels so—”

Before Toriko could say familiar, I hugged her tight to block out her sight, hearing, and sense of smell.

That was when I heard a low, female voice whisper in my ear.

“Let’s—, —you, too.”

“Huh...?”

I hadn’t been able to perceive her words. However, I had the impression that whatever she said was horrifying.

The woman I had been able to glare at before had, merely by using words I didn’t understand the meaning of, become the source of intense terror. I didn’t want to see anything. Didn’t want to know anything. Despite that, my head rose against my own will.

When the woman’s face entered my vision again, my right eye glimpsed something behind her. There was no question. This woman was connected to the ultrablue. They who existed beyond the depths of the other world. The great and bizarre beings that sought to make us cross the blue abyss with terror and madness—I felt their presence, and that alone was enough to overload me.

Every one of my sensory organs bugged out, and as the error caused my brain and nervous system to crash, I looked on indifferently, as if it were someone else’s problem.

7

When I came to, I was lying in a bed.

Kozakura, who was sitting next to me, knocked her chair back as she rose from it. She had a panicked look on her face as she leaned over me.

“Sorawo-chan, do you understand me? Can you see me?”

“...I can see you, and I understand you, yes,” I answered in a hoarse voice. Kozakura breathed a sigh of relief.

“Phew... Don’t worry me like that, you idiot...”

I detected a faint scent of antiseptic from the pastel blue linens. I couldn’t see the rest of the room past the bedside curtain, but I quickly realized I was in a medical facility.

“What about you, Kozakura? Are you all right?”

“I’m just fine. How about you?”

“Good enough, I guess.”

The truth was, my belly still felt heavy. Hopefully there wasn’t too much lingering damage.

“Where is this place? That hospital ward, maybe? How long have we been—”

I tried to sit up, but Kozakura stopped me.

“Don’t push yourself. This is the DS Lab’s medical examination room. It’s been about three hours.”

I looked at the bed beside mine. I could already tell by the feeling of my left hand, but Toriko was lying there. The two beds were placed side-by-side, without a gap in between.

“You two were both completely deranged. You were huddled, like in a flexed burial, and singing nonsense songs to yourselves. You were holding hands tight, and wouldn’t let go, so we laid the two of you down together. Anyway, you just rest. I’ll go call Migiwa.”

“Is Toriko... all right?” I hesitantly asked, and Kozakura twisted her lips sarcastically.

“She was up and hollering not that long ago. Is Sorawo-chan all right? Will she wake up? ...She got tired and went back to sleep, though. It seemed like she had more energy than you do.”

With that said, Kozakura turned and left the room.

Resting my head on the pillow, I looked at Toriko's sleeping face.

"This, after you said all that stuff about what'd happen if you were gone..."

In her sleep, Toriko had my hand clutched in her own right hand, and she showed no sign of letting it go.

"Ngh..."

Toriko opened her eyes slightly, mumbling. "If you don't like it, I'll let go," she said.

"No one said that," I replied with a sigh. "Do you remember what happened?"

Toriko's answer was vague. "I remember up to us opening the box... Not much after that. I feel like you did something for me, though."

"Yeah, well, it was nothing major, really," I guiltily mumbled, and Toriko bit her lip.

"Sorry. This was all because I asked you to do something like that. I—"

"Oh, geez. Let's just drop it already." I got irritated, and cut Toriko off. "Listen, Toriko, you seem to think you're making me help you search for Satsuki-san, and you feel guilty about that, but... It doesn't bother me at all. Actually, the fact you feel that way pisses me off way more." I kept on talking, driven by an impulse I couldn't control.

"You told me to make friends and broaden my horizons, but that's not it. You're the one who's broadening my horizons. Like with the beach... Though, I feel like the alcohol is half to thank for that one, too."

Toriko listened to me in silence.

"The reason I worked so hard to save the guys from Palehorse Battalion was because I didn't want any more people in my other world than necessary. I wanted them to get out already. Having that many people around? It's a real downer."

"Wh-Whaa... That was why?" Toriko was so taken aback that her mouth hung open.

"Yeah, it was. From the very beginning, my objective has never changed. I just

don't want other people messing up the playground I found for myself."

Toriko's eyes widened, and I told her: "But I want you there with me. I wish we could play together forever. So, please—don't treat me like a victim."

Toriko rolled onto her side beneath the blankets, looking straight at me.

"Oh, I see. That's right. We're partners in crime, after all."

"Darn straight."

She finally gets it, huh? I thought with a nod.

"I see. So that's why with Karateka-chan you..." Toriko whispered to herself, then giggled.

"...Is something funny?"

"Nah. I was just thinking, 'Sorawo's a real pain to deal with, huh?'"

"Huh?!" I felt insulted, and just sat there with my mouth hanging open. The look on my face must have been funny, because Toriko laughed out loud.

"What's so much of a pain to deal with about me?"

"Who knows? Maybe think about that yourself."

"Toriko...!"

I tried to press her on it, but Toriko hid under the covers. Was she going to pretend to be asleep? She wasn't coming out. How rude. Calling a frank person like me a pain to deal with? Who was she to talk? Getting angry, I laid my head back down on the pillow.

Was that woman in black really Satsuki Uruma? What did she mean to do, luring us in, transforming us... and then what?

I was too tired to think properly, so I gave up and closed my eyes.

Satsuki Uruma's notebook. The beings waiting in the depths of the other world, where those who had an encounter of the fourth kind went. The increasing number of things I was hiding from Toriko.

I had a lot of things to think about, but not now. First, I needed to recover; regain my stamina and sanity.

Once I've got my energy back, we can ride the AP-1 together, across hills and fields, as far as adventure might take us...

With that whimsical thought in my mind, I drifted off to sleep.

Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motif. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. This will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread careful.

■File 5: The Operation to Rescue US Forces at Kisaragi Station

Kankandara first appeared in the story “Kankandara” (3/26/2009) which was posted to the website “Kowai Hanashi Toukou: Horaa Teraa” [Scary Story Submissions: Horror Teller]. This post vanished soon after for some reason, but was reposted with the comment, “Reposting this because it was scary.” (4/14/2009). I was unable to verify the reason for the initial post disappearing because the Horror Teller site no longer exists. Furthermore, more than two years later, it was also posted on the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 271 (6/26/2011).

The most defining trait of this story is probably the intense presentation of the creature. Kankandara’s appearance as six-armed woman with the lower body of a snake is reminiscent of the Marilith monster from the Dungeons & Dragons role playing game.

■File 6: Resort Night at the Beach of the End

The portrayal of the boarding house uses a post to “Kowai Hanashi Toukou: Horaa Teraa” [Scary Story Submissions: Horror Teller] titled “Resort Baito” [Part-timer at a Resort] (8/4/2009) as its motif.

The developments of the later half partially reference “Shinu Hodo Share ni

Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 78 (there are two threads with this number), posts 797 through 850, “Suma Kaigan Nite” [At Suma Coast] (7/14/2004). (This is mixed with elements of Resort Baito.) That range includes posts like “I know this one!” and “This is a famous incident in my area,” which (probably) came from posters other than the narrator, but the veracity of these claims is unclear.

■File 7: Attack of the Ninja Cats

As touched on in the story itself, the famous “Lately, I’ve been targeted by ninja cats” cypypasta is in fact the prologue to a horror story. It started on the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board with “Mi no Mawari de Hen na Koto ga Okottara Jikkyou Suru Sure” [The If Something Weird Happens Around You Report it Live Here Thread] thread 151, post 121 (3/21/2008) and live reporting continued from there with the denizens of the board getting involved, too. After that thread went down, independent threads titled “Nekonin” [Ninja Cat] (3/23/2008) and “Nekonin — Ni no Maki” [Ninja Cat — The Second Scroll] (3/26/2008) were opened, but the story faded out over a period of about a month. At the time, the reporter uploaded a number of images, but due to the image hosting site shutting down they can no longer be seen.

For another similar preexisting story, there is also “Kanshisha Neko” [Observer Cats] (10/10/2006) which was posted in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 145. This is a story about someone who wanders across a gathering of cats and later finds themselves being watched by them, but has no ninja elements.

■File 8: Little Bird in a Box

“Kotoribako” [Child-taking Box] was first told in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 99, post 912 (6/6/2005). Because the reporter said, “Please, tell me any information that might be connected to this,” a large number of horror

stories involving cursed boxes were written on the internet by multiple authors.

One story acting as a catalyst for people to say, “I had a similar experience,” or “I know a similar story,” and tell similar stories (or dig up preexisting ones) is one of the major defining traits of internet ghost stories. This trend, visible also with “Kunekune” and “The Spacetime Man,” was in play with “Kotoribako,” too, and discussion of it continued in its own dedicated thread up until around 2008.

In regards to this chapter’s civilian discussion of government and civilian research into the occult in the ‘90s, I have referenced Takao Saitou’s *Karuto Shihon Shugi* [Cult Capitalism] (Bunshun Bunko, 2000).

Also, though this was not explained in the first volume, there are two inspirations for the blue of the Otherside, too.

The first is Toshiki Agatsuma’s story “Himitsu” [The Secret] included in *FKB Kaiyuuroku Kikimimizoushi* [FKB Record of Ghosts and Apparitions: Strange Tales] (Takeshobo, 2015) This is a story where the other side of the peep hole on the front door was blue.

The other is a ghost story I read online. If I recall, it went like this: the storyteller’s female friend is lost in a residential area and can’t get home, and calls on the phone asking for help. The storyteller goes to pick the female friend up accompanied by a roommate with powerful psychic abilities, but despite being able to talk on the phone, and supposedly being in the same place, they cannot seem to meet. It’s almost like she’s wandered into another world. Eventually, the woman says she sees a man in blue clothes, and says she will go and ask him for directions. Immediately, the roommate looks panicked, saying, “The blue man is dangerous, you must stay away from him.” Ultimately, the woman is saved, but strange happenings continue...

I may have mistaken some of the minor details, but that’s roughly how it went. If you wonder why this is somewhat vague, that is because I can no longer reread it. This story was uploaded not as text, but as an image summarizing a larger text. The images have long since vanished from the net, and cannot be searched for. You might call it a variation of the Spacetime Man story, but the creepy blue man who even a powerful psychic couldn’t identify, and the nonsensical story that comes afterward provided such a bizarre and

detailed account that a summary couldn't hope to portray it all. It's a real shame that it's been lost.

For another similar story, there is also “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 129, post 361 “Aoi Hito ga Kuru!” [The Blue Person is Coming!] (15/5/2006). It is a story where the storyteller's missing elder sister returns, now afraid of a “blue person,” then vanishes once again. It is interesting that it is a disappearance story, just like the aforementioned encounter with the blue man.

There are many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken indirect influence. Thank you for always enjoying and being frightened.

Special Column: Sorawo and Toriko Chit-Chat About the Original Ghost Stories

■ Kankandara (From File 5)

Toriko: How do you read 姦姦蛇螺?

Sorawo: Kankandara.

Toriko: That's tough. What kind of ghost story is it again?

Sorawo: There's a middle-school boy who's been violent towards his mother. His father, who has snapped, tells him that if he's going to be so violent, he should go do it in the forbidden forest. The boy falls for the provocation and goes to the forest where he is attacked by a six-armed woman with the lower body of a snake. Oh. Her lower half doesn't come out at first. Later, someone familiar with the situation says, “That was close. If her lower half had come out, you'd have died instantly,” but—

Toriko: Whoa, whoa. I don't get it. First, isn't his Dad kind of acting weird? Isn't this middle-school kid a little too obedient given how violent he is?

Sorawo: Well, there's all sorts of families.

Toriko: Yeah, sure. But still.

Sorawo: The way it's written is kind of indecent, huh? Six women... a snake... and ra.

Toriko: Ra.

■ Resort Part-timer/At Suma Coast (From File 6)

Sorawo: "Resort Part-timer" is the story of a male university student who takes up part time work at a resort boarding house and has a scary time. "At Suma Coast" is a story about scary things happening on the Suma Coast.

Toriko: Yeah. I kind of got that.

Sorawo: Really? You really have good instincts, huh, Toriko.

Toriko: Aww, you're making me blush. And?

Sorawo: Right. In "Resort Part-timer," the mistress of the boarding house takes a tray of food up to the supposedly unused second floor every day, so the suspicious protagonist sneaks upstairs and is possessed by something creepy.

Toriko: Well, that's no good. Sneaking upstairs like that. Maybe bad things happen to him because he does things like that.

Sorawo: The thing is, maybe the call for part timers was a set up to lure in young men from the beginning... is one suspicion.

Toriko: Eww.

Sorawo: There's an epidemic of bad part-time jobs, you know?

Toriko: So, tell me about the other one.

Sorawo: It's a middle-school boy talking about being attacked by bikers at Kobe's Suma Coast, but things get stranger and stranger. Like green children, and aliens. He starts talking about nonsense, and the way he speaks is all over the place. Anyway, it's a creepy story.

Toriko: You think... the blow to the head might have had lasting effects? Is it

okay to treat this as a ghost story?

Sorawo: Though some posters say “it’s a famous story in the area,” others point out his dialect isn’t the local one, so the story’s kind of in a weird spot. Even though it feels so real. Honestly, I think it’s fair to call it a ghost story.

Toriko: Well, if you say so.

■ **Ninja Cats (From File 7)**

Sorawo: This story’s about being attacked by ninja cats.

Toriko: ...

Sorawo: Don’t look at me like that.

Toriko: Well, hey.

Sorawo: If I start from the beginning, it all begins with a post on the net that says the poster was attacked by ninja cats in their neighborhood park.

Toriko: Is this a scary story? Or a cute story?

Sorawo: Given they’re coming at him with jagged blades, I’m gonna say it’s not so cute.

Toriko: I hear there’s incidents like this in the U.S. occasionally. Someone who’s a little too into it goes nuts in the streets with a ninja sword.

Sorawo: Getting attacked by human ninjas? Man, the U.S. is scary.

Toriko: In the news report I saw, he was subdued with a water hose.

Sorawo: A water hose, huh? That’d probably work on the cats, too. They hate water.

Toriko: I can imagine them all wet and disappointed now.

Sorawo: That’s cute!

■ **Kotoribako (From File 8)**

Sorawo: This thing we found in the shed is actually a super dangerous cursed

item! That's the sort of story it is... It's pretty atrocious.

Toriko: What comes out? Is it like a jack-in-the-box?

Sorawo: No, just being near it triggers the curse.

Toriko: What does the curse do exactly?

Sorawo: It makes women and children suffer and die.

Toriko: Scary. It's like a mass of murderous intentions.

Sorawo: That's right. It's said that these things were created to be sent to a person's house, killing the women and children with the curse, in order to exterminate their family line, so there's real murderous intent here.

Toriko: So, it doesn't hurt men?

Sorawo: Yeah. But just holding it may cause the curse to affect your whole family.

Toriko: Nasty stuff.

Sorawo: Even though the name sounds cute.

Toriko: Hmm?





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by Iori Miyazawa

Illustrations by Shirakaba

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Krys Loh

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